Would you do anything for me?
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Would you do anything for me?

by MarionetteFtHJM

Summary

There’s a rumor going around the base. It’s an innocent one, it’s one that’s been following him for a while now. It never fails to make the guys laugh and the dames snicker behind their palms. It’s a rumor that, on a good day, makes him grin and shake his head bashfully and on a bad day it makes his chest ache something fierce.

Notes

First of all! This is based on the show's characters portrayed by Butler and Turner solely and bares no ill will towards the real people that had inspired the show.
Fueled by my incessant need to make everything angsty and gay, I set out to write this like a week ago and here we are now.
I've written wwi yaoi before (1917) and now we're here some years later, much like europe in the last century, another war to write about /lh.
This fic had me googling horse genealogy, yall.
Hope you like this little brainchild of mine, mind the tags and i'll see you in the end notes!

See the end of the work for more notes

There's a rumor going around the base. It's an innocent one, it's one that's been following him for a while now. It never fails to make the guys laugh and the dames snicker behind their palms. It's a rumor that, on a good day, makes him grin and shake his head bashfully and on a bad day it makes his chest ache something fierce.

"This is Major John Egan, but he'll tell you to call 'im *Bucky."* His companion clicks his tongue loudly, posture loose and relaxed as he sloshes his drink over the lip of the glass. "An' this is his better half, or his better three-quarters, *Buck."*

"I'm not sure the math works out on that one, Curt." He pats the shorter's shoulder, shaking him a little and the other lets himself be swayed. He spies Buck rolling his eyes off at the side in a rude, *ungentlemanly,* gesture but it's not like it matters. There's no use in introducing Buck to the girls and they all know it. But Curt still tries because he's just persistent like that, because he loves causing a scene.

"Don't I get a last name, Biddick?" Buck drawls and he sees the brown-eyed girl to his left take in a sharp breath. Oh, how he knows that feeling intimately.

"Nah," Curt flicks one of his lapels, tapping his chest next. "Ain't nobody gonna use it anyway."

"*Major Cleven*," Bucky drones out with an exaggerated motion of his entire body – a show for the ladies and to dispel his own jitters. "That's just so *boring*, Buck!"

"So you're *Bucky* and he's *Buck*?" One of the drunker girls repeats the phrase they'd heard countless times before. It sounds a little different coming out with an accent but it still makes him grin. He loves people accepting this as a fact, loves that it rolls off of people's tongues so easily and that hardly anyone *really* questions it anymore.

"Story goes," Curt continues before he can interject and he lets the other tell it because every time he does, it ends up sounding a little different, picks up some new detail that amuses him. "That he saw our little *Gale* in training one day and couldn't resist his sad, *sad* eyes. So he adopted him, took him home like a pup, gave him his name and then told everyone else to fuck off."

"Curt," Buck grunts in warning, smacking the other on the back of the head, making him spill his drink on his own trousers with a yelp.

“That’s a new one,” He cackles because that’s not at all what happened. He supposes that Curt had gotten a little *too* sloppy with his scotch this fine evening, running his mouth even more than he usually would.

“Fascinating,” The girl that, he guesses, is the group’s designated nanny for the evening, stares at the scene in front of them but her words are directed at John. He can feel the hair at the back of his neck stand on end as her piercing gaze turns towards him. Some of the girls are helping Biddick clean the scotch off his pants while Buck palms his face in disappointment, but the girl staring at him is looking into the depths of his very soul.

“I heard a rumor before coming over here, from the other girls, Major.” She purrs, moving closer to him, forcing him to shift his body to accommodate hers.

“Oh, yeah? And what might that be?” He challenges her, intrigued at her smooth tones and her confidence, the way her red lipstick seems impeccable and how her accent lilts as she speaks.

“They say that the two of you are joined at the hip.” Her red-lacquered nails tap the buckle of his belt. “That you’ve gifted him that little moniker so that whenever someone calls, both of you turn to answer without exception. Two peas in a pod, two sides of the same coin, never apart.”

He swallows heavily, this is decidedly not the version of the rumor he’s heard but it’s certainly *something.* He doesn’t know if she set out to gain his attention but she’s certainly got it now.

“Say, you never did give me your name.” He wants to know, his question genuine, because she’s got the right flavor of spitfire in her eyes that has always captivated him and getting with her tonight seems like *fun*.

“Is that so? Are you not going to give me yours instead?” Her grin is sharp as she regards him coolly, “Or is that honor reserved for handsome, blue-eyed Majors only?”

He blinks at her slowly, stunned at the audacity *and* the implication leaving her mouth. “Pardon?”

She pats his cheek with another smile and turns back to her friends, gently chiding one of them for getting too drunk and chipping a nail. Like nothing happened. Because it didn’t and whatever is brewing

inside his chest is *nothing.* He's – well. He doesn't really know *what* he's feeling.

It's not like he's never been rejected before, far from it. But the way she did it, the implications of her words skating a little too close to the truth, it's left him unmoored – left him in free-fall. His palms begin sweating as the alcohol swirls in his head. He hadn't had that much to drink tonight, surely? But there he is, feeling like the world's tilting on its axis, like he's nose-diving in his Fort.

"Bucky?" A rough voice trying its best at gentle pierces through his confusion. "Y'alright?"

"Fine, fine." He swallows the last of the golden liquor in his glass and gives Buck another bright smile that feels too stiff on his face. He knows that he's not doing much at reassuring the other but it's always worth a try.

"Always more dames like her!" Curt throws an arm over his shoulder, pulling him down with the motion. He hadn't even noticed the girls leaving but it seems that they have because he's alone with his two friends once again. As alone as one can be in a pub crowded with soldiers.

"Yeah, 'course. Shame about the blonde one, though, a few more tall tales and you would've had her, Curt!" He throws the other's arm off and grabs him around the waist, half-wrestling and half-lifting him off the ground as he yells.

Buck remains silent, though, always so stoic and observant. It wouldn't surprise him if Gale had heard what she said even with how loud the room is.

"Come on, Croz and Bubbles are buying rounds in the corner. Better not miss out on free booze." He urges the shorter over to where the rest of their friends are. Curt's head snaps up at that and a messy grin overtakes his face as he stumbles away in a hurry.

He's about to follow when a hand grips his wrist, stopping him from entering the dancing crowd.

"John," And *uh-oh,* that's Buck's *no-nonsense* tone.

He grits his teeth and fights not to tense up, wishing he'd had more to drink so that he wouldn't be reacting like this in the first place.

“Easy, Buck.” He pries the other’s fingers off him, taking the other’s hand in a flirty gesture and pulling the other closer instead. “Askin’ for my attention like that, a guy might get ideas.” It’s his *MO,* flirting to dispel discomfort, to cover up dead silence and his own unease. It’s a simple fact of his existence and the guys don’t mind because he still goes home with a gal every time. They don’t mind because it doesn’t mean anything. And it mostly doesn’t. But flirting with Buck has always been something that left him feeling a little too raw, scooped out and burning up like he’d taken a direct hit to the cockpit.

“What’d she say to you, Bucky?” The other shakes his head, blue eyes squinted with suspicion. “I ain’t ever seen you like this.”

He chuckles, throwing his head back as it erupts out of him in a laugh. Releasing the other with a light shove, Bucky picks up an unsupervised glass off the bar next to him and downs it.

“Don’t worry your little blonde head over it, Buck.” He advises because he can’t keep thinking about it, can’t keep dwelling on how apparently *obvious* he is. “Nothing I haven’t heard before.”

He ignores the unasked question in the other’s eyes and joins their friends instead – the ones that’ll always look at him a little funny if Buck isn’t by his side, the ones that’ll speak about the two of them as an inseparable pair. And they look at him funny now, too, because Buck hadn’t followed after him, had instead left him to his own devices. He tries not to let it sting.

Curt finds him out between the planes later that night. Or was it morning, considering the sun was already lightening the horizon. Well, whatever it is, he still hadn’t been to sleep so he’s counting it as the same night.

“Now, I know what yer gonna say.” Biddick sways into his field of vision and he eyes him silently. He’d seen him coming, of course, it was impossible not to when he had been singing for the last five minutes of his walk over.

“Yer gonna say: *ooh, Curt, get outta ‘ere! I don’t need ya mucking up the place. Don’t need ya pity either.”* The other falls onto the ground next to him, leaning into his side heavily where he’s propped up against the wheel of his plane.

“And to that I say: fuck you, John Egan!” Curt hisses into his ear with a cackle and John pushes him away with a grunt. “Fuck you, and your

moping."

"I'm not moping."

"Pah!" Curt spits to the side in that brash way of his and John grimaces. "You ain't mopin'. And this non-mopin's got nothing to do w'that girl that shot ya down and then proceeded to have an *intellectual conversation* with one Buck Cleven."

Fuck you, Curt, he doesn't say because that's predictable and because saying anything would mean that the bastard's right about why he's out here.

If he were honest with himself, which he tends not to be, he'd admit that Biddick is right. Once he'd left Buck at the bar and joined the rest of the group present for their card game, that same girl with the copper curls and the piercing eyes had sidled up to Buck and proceeded to hold his attention for a whole hour until he eventually escorted her out of the pub. And, it being *Saint Gale Cleven*, he knows that, at least, he was just being polite and hadn't gone home with her. However, that doesn't stop him from feeling it like a kick to the stomach and a punch to the ego. But the worst part is that, well, he can't make up his mind about *why* that is exactly.

"Caught a bit of their conversation, if you're curious." Curt sing-song into his shoulder, grinning so wide and so easy that John envies him in that moment.

"I don't care," He persists but Curt's not one to be deterred.

"Heard them talkin' about horses, she trains them for the derby and all those fancy Lords 'n Ladies." The other hums, lying down onto the cold asphalt. "He was pretty into it and she offered to show 'im when he gets leave time."

And *fuck,* that's one of Buck's *things*. Fucker loves horses. Even if it's strictly non-romantic, he might take her up on the offer. He knows Buck misses home despite never talking about it. Knows the other misses Texas, too, and the little ranch near basic where he went sometimes.

"Thanks, Curt, makin' me feel better." He thuds his head against the metal next to his face, the sound echoing.

"Thought you weren't mopin'." Curtis needles with his words *and* his fingers, burrowing cold digits under his untucked shirt and making

him hiss.

“Nothing to it!” The other bursts up in a flash of energetic motion that John can’t follow with his eyes. “He won’t go to her. Not when he’s got your sorry ass to worry about.”

The words sear down his spine, splintering and leaving shrapnel in his organs. Biddick might be drunk off his fucking rocker but he hit the nail on the damn head. It’s almost eerie how his beady blue eyes see so much and how his loose lips spew bull from the moment he wakes up and yet he can read Bucky like the damn bible.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed.” He stands up and dusts himself off, pulling the other after him and steadying him when he looks like he’ll keel over.

“Nothin’ to worry about, Major. Nothin’ at all.” Biddick mumbles and gives him a half-hearted hug before stumbling away.

John prays to God that the other forgets all about this conversation by the next mission.

Being back in the air takes some of stress off his shoulders. Not being responsible for stupid shit like sheet corners and toilet paper and instead being back in the cockpit makes him feel a little better about this whole war thing. He finally feels like he’s doing something proper useful again. He’s high off the feeling of a mission well done and he’s ready to celebrate. But.

“It’s tails, pay up, Bucky!” Douglass smacks the table in front of him and everyone around them groans as John finally loses his streak.

“Son of a bitch,” He forks over the cash, much to James’ delight. “You got lucky this time.”

“Really?” The other grins at him, “Says you after guessin’ what it’ll land on eight times in a row?”

“Couldn’t have gone for ten,” DeMarco hisses into his glass and Curt takes his hat off his head, thwacking him on the nose with it.

“Shouldn’t bet on stupid shit,” The shorter grins and somewhere in the background, John’s aware of Buck cooing over Meatball. He wants to turn and look, wants to take in the carefree grin the other always has around the dog but refrains.

“So let me get this straight,” Croz leans into the table. “You’re bettin’ on how many times he’ll be right? Seems like a losing man’s game.”

“Oh, put a cork in it,” Someone slaps the man on the back and they all laugh as Douglass packs up the coin he’d been using with a kiss to the object and a wink at Croz. The empty table is quickly filled with cards, however, and Bucky spies Curt leaving the group and heading for where Buck is.

He thinks the other’s going to try and get Gale to join their card game but Curt just settles down on the ground next to Buck’s chair and Meatball, the two of them chatting quietly in the din of the room. It’s odd, seeing Curt so subdued but he supposes it does happen every once in a while. The guy’s adaptable and Buck has moments where he prefers silent companions to the ruckus Bucky always causes. It makes something sour curdle in his stomach, knowing that if they weren’t stuck together by the sheer force of John’s will, Buck probably wouldn’t have chosen him. *Fuck*.

“You in, Bucky?” Douglass asks and he shakes his head.

“Next round, I need a smoke and some air.”

“Those two don’t usually go together well,” The bombardier grins and he waves the guy off with a scoff.

He leaves, shoving through the crowded pilots and crewmen until he’s finally outside. He pulls out the cigarettes and takes one, sticking it between his teeth as he fumbles through his pockets for a spark.

“Need a light?”

“Fuck!” He jumps slightly, dropping the pack. “Scared me shitless, you little rat.” He groans as he sees Curt standing there with a smarmy smirk on his face. “Gimmie that.” He snatches the lighter out of the other’s hand and brings the flame to the smoke at his lips.

“Saw you leavin’, thought something was up.” The other shrugs, sidling up next to him as he is wont to do.

“Maybe I wanted to be alone out here. Ever think about that?” He gripes, inhaling the nicotine and letting it linger.

“Nah,” Curt shakes his head, “You never wanna be alone, Major. ‘S why you always got either Buck or a girl with you.”

He hopes that the way he freezes is imperceptible but something tells him Biddick notices anyway. He loosens his shoulders forcibly and raises an eyebrow at the shorter.

“You equatin’ Buck to the dames? Careful, don’t let him hear you say that.” He tries for a joke, tries so hard to force humor into it but Biddick just stares up at him blankly, unblinking and unnerving.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, John.” Curt snorts in that dismissive way he has about him. John sometimes wishes he could punch him and not get grounded or court-martialed.

“Leave it alone, Curt.” He says instead, opting to both admit and deny at the same time. “Better that way.”

“If you say so.” Leaning into him and offering some warmth, the other hums. It seems like Biddick wants to say something else in addition but the door opening stops him from blurting out whatever it was.

They turn and watch as Buck exits with Meatball in tow. He, too, freezes up for a second, eyes darting between them and then to where Curt is plastered to his side before continuing out of the building like he hadn’t taken that pause.

“Y’alright, Buck?” He tilts his head and the other nods, motioning down to the dog.

“He was lookin’ a little restless so I offered to take him outside for a bit.” Buck explains with a slight uptick to the corner of his mouth and it’s almost enough to have John’s heart rabbiting in his chest. Fuck’s sake. He’s certain Curt can feel how his entire body shivers all over at even such a small blessing from the other.

“I’ll take ‘im for a run,” Curt butts in and before either of them can say anything, he’s letting out a piercing whistle and taking off down the road, Meatball giving chase instantly.

He snorts, shaking his head in amusement and cursing the other mentally for leaving him alone with Buck.

“Saw you hit eight guesses in a row earlier.” Gale says, making conversation, and John nods.

“I think Douglass fumbled the last toss, I could have gotten DeMarco his ten.” He grinds the butt into the ground, mourns the loss since Curt’s taken off with his light. “Say, you wouldn’t have matches on

hand?"

Gale's eyes shoot up to the new, unlit, cigarette in his mouth with a look before patting his pockets. He comes up with a lighter, surprisingly, and even more shockingly, it's one of John's old ones. One he thought he broke a while back. He doesn't say anything, motioning for it. He doesn't say anything when Buck flicks the light on and holds it up for him instead, either.

He shields the flame with his hand and lights the cigarette up, trying hard not to stare at how the flame flickers and reflects in the other's eyes. Or at the toothpick between the other's rosy lips.

"A real life-saver, Buck." He nods his thanks and the other shrugs easily as if it's not a big deal.

"I think ten is pushing it."

"Don't think I'm that lucky?" He teases, pressing cold fingers to the other's cheek and making him flinch back with a swat of the hand.

"I think you should save your luck up instead." Buck sighs, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks, trying to keep warm probably.

"We don't need luck," He rolls his eyes, "Ain't that what you always said? Superstitions, all of it. Bunch of *hooey*."

The other's face contorts in a brief grimace and he watches the emotions flit over it one by one. Anger, sadness, resignation, before it settles into that cold neutrality that everyone's so used to seeing. John wishes he could make him crack. Wishes he could pry him open and take all his thoughts for his own. He doesn't feel like that's a healthy desire to have.

"Anything that can help, at this point." The other settles on saying and pats his shoulder. "Tell Curt to bring Meatball back inside once they're done runnin' around like headless chicken."

"Sir, yessir!" He salutes the other mockingly and Gale kicks him in the shin in retaliation, heavy enough to sting and make him laugh.

They lose Curt over Regensburg.

He stands there, trying to make a joke out of it, trying to make it seem like the guy's still with them, will be waiting for them when they get

back, but he can tell that Buck's not buying it. It's in the set of his shoulders as they bake slowly in the desert sun, too pale and pasty to do anything but burn under its rays. They've lost Curt over Regensburg and he'd almost lost Buck, too. Gale had, however, touched down on African soil - his Fort shot to hell and barely keeping up with the rest as it puttered through the air - so he has the privilege of standing next to him in the blazing heat. He's ruffled and angry, but with his hair shining all golden, he looks like an avenging angel to John.

Bucky counts his days, counts the hours until their return. And when they do make it back to England, he counts the weeks since they lost Curt over Regensburg.

A party hardly seems appropriate but nobody's going to deny a crew their victory lap. Twenty-five missions flown and they're home free. *The lucky ones*, someone whispers but Bucky knows it's never truly about luck. They meet the new crew that's come to join them, come to replace the ones leaving or the ones lost. They're green and it's obvious, there's still a spark in them yet to be extinguished. Still idealistically attached to the idea of heroism. Rosenthal, *Rosie*, eyes him and Buck like he can read into what's not there and Bucky is immediately wary of the guy. But they seem a good sort. If they fly half as well as they yap, maybe they'll live to see the mythical Twenty-five like today's lucky winners. Like him and Buck will, like Biddick never did. *They lost Curt over Regensburg.*

He downs his drink and then takes the one he brought for Gale – but was John's all along because Major Cleven doesn't drink, doesn't *smoke, doesn't gamble, doesn't dance, doesn't kiss* - and downs that one, too.

The song playing switches out for a slower one, giving the men and the dames a chance to get closer on the floor and John watches as Buck picks Meatball up, spinning the confused dog in a slow circle. Gale winks at him teasingly and he tries to smile even though he feels acid in the back of his throat. It drips down his gullet and into his stomach. He wonders: would he burn up from the inside if he swallowed a spark? Wonders if that's what Curt felt in his final moments when they lost him over Regensburg.

He watches as Gale pecks the dog on its furry head sweetly before setting him back down. The thing woofs softly and refuses to move even as Gale tries to shoo it away. Kinship with a dog, *how the mighty fall.* He leaves the club in a hurry, feeling like he can't breathe. Grief

chokes him with strong hands around his windpipe, cutting off the air trying to flow into his lungs. He can still feel the Algerian sand underneath his clothes, under his fingernails, under his skin. They fucking lost – *so much already.*

Buck's on his heels because he *always is* and maybe John's not the dog, maybe it's Gale with his pearly whites sunken into bone and flesh, rending Bucky asunder.

“John,” The other calls gently. More often than not, he’s *John* to Buck. He’s John when it’s serious, he’s John when being reprimanded and he’s John when his attention is needed. Rarely anyone calls him this anymore. Always Major, Egan, *Bucky* or any combination of the three. But to Gale he’s John when it matters.

“Gale,” He returns, eyes wide and brimming with panic that starts reflecting in the other’s gaze.

He can’t voice what he’s thinking. If he starts spilling his guts all over the asphalt under their feet, it’ll never stop. He’ll be rendered immobile with it, buried under the weight of his own grief. The grief that he has no time for, not even a drink poured out in Curt’s honor. Not one lick of respect, only a hastily-scrawled letter to his sister and his ma’ back in New York.

“He’s gone, Buck.” He finally chokes out and the other’s eyes widen in understanding. “Just like that.”

“I know,” The other steps closer to him but all he can feel is *rage.* Why do these schmucks get to go home when Curt had to die? What if they’re next? What then? He sure as hell isn’t willing to find out. He lashes out, smacking Buck’s hand away from him with a hiss.

“Do you?” He retaliates to the gentle understanding with vitriol and anger. “Because it sure doesn’t look like it! You barely seem human on a good day, *Major.*”

Ire clouds the other’s clear eyes and his outstretched hand falls, closing into a tight fist. For the first time, he’s scared Buck’s going to actually hit him.

“Not all of us can throw our emotions around like you do.” The other grinds out through a clenched jaw. “Some of us deal with grief in ways other than smokin’, drinkin’ and fuckin’.”

The targeted jab hits home and Bucky would have preferred the punch

to the face. He may have been numb before, when he'd forced Curt to hit him, but he's not now. No, he's feeling entirely too much right now. It's all catching up with him and they've got so many missions to fly *still.* He'll end up in the flak house if this continues, he knows. They'll force him to take leave, force him out of the air and that's the last thing he wants.

"How do you do it, then?" He pleads, the anger replaced by desperation and he brings one of Gale's hands up to clutch at. "Sanest man I know, Buck, please. *How*?"

The other's eyes soften at the genuine plea. He never could stay mad for long – at anyone, least of all John himself. This fact alone would make him preen but all he can think about is *loss.*

"Curt was a good friend." Gale speaks solemnly, his other hand coming to rest on John's shoulder. "He was a good pilot. He died serving a good cause. A cause he believed was worth fighting for. A cause *I* have to believe in." There's a heavy pause as the other swallows, fighting for the right words under John's watchful and expectant gaze.

"Any man here can tell you to look at the big picture, that we can't let the Krauts win. And knowing you, you'll scoff at them." Buck bestows upon him a timid little smile that's more a sardonic lift of his mouth than anything real. He treasures it regardless.

"But they'd be right. So we have to keep going for everyone we lost. We have to win the war for everyone who won't be able to be there with us when they're shootin' fireworks in the sky, signaling our victory." The other finishes with a squeeze to both his hand and shoulder and John lets the words settle into his own head, trying to accept the other's conviction as his own.

He's always known Buck to be methodical. He's polished and proper. He puts away all his things after he uses them, folds all his clothes neatly always, tucks in his sheet corners without needing to be reminded, eats his food one bite of each part of his meal at a time. It makes sense that his thoughts are just as orderly. Grief folded into a square and slotted under something lighter, something one might call *optimism* if he were foolish. John knows better. It's not optimism, not anymore, it's *determination*. It's perseverance in the face of adversity – picking oneself up by the bootstraps and all that is hardwired into the *American way.* Gale Cleven could alone embody the *man versus man* myth while John often feels like *man versus nature*, working against

forces that he can't control and that hate him inherently.

That scooped out feeling returns, his chest a gaping open wound as he wobbles closer to Buck who accepts him into his arms, holding him steady as he clutches at the leather of his jacket.

"I miss him," He admits and Gale hums, rubbing at his back gently.

"I know. You two were fast friends, know you went to him when you couldn't talk to me about things." Buck sighs and squeezes him closer for a moment before releasing his swaying form. "I'm here for you, Bucky. Whatever it is you feel like you can't tell me about, I'll wait till you feel otherwise."

And how can he say it now? How can he begin to explain just how much Curtis Biddick knew, how much he gleaned just by sitting back and observing? How can he come to Buck and mope and pout when he doesn't know John's moping and pouting over *him.* No, this is something that was his and Curt's alone. And now it's just his. Alone again because it's safer that way, because it's better that way. Left on his own, he can keep this whole *yearning* thing under lock and key.

"I'm sorry, Buck." He huffs, allowing himself another hug. "Sorry you're stuck with me now."

"Was always gonna be stuck with you," Gale mumbles back into the side of his head, nose in brown curls. "Wouldn't have it any other way, either."

It sounds too good to be true, the words too kind to comprehend. That Buck would willingly lump them in together, that he'd stick to his side despite all of John's flaws and vices. And even if it's not in a way that he wants it, he'll take Buck's companionship and hoard it like the treasure that it is.

Command eventually gives the two of them three days leave. It's not the flak house, but it's close enough to a dismissal that it stings a little. The only consolation is that it's *both* of them getting grounded for the duration and not just John. He feels a little excited even, happy to have Buck to himself for three days, excited to draw him into every bar and pub they come across even if he'll mope around in the back the entire evening.

"Buck!" He jogs lightly to catch up to the blonde, a big grin on his face that the other grimaces at. "You ready to hit up London with me?

I heard there's a good jazz scene, I bet they can make even your sorry ass dance."

"Ah," Buck rubs the back of his head and alarm bells start blaring in the back of John's brain. "I was actually thinking of hitching a ride to Ipswich, had one of the ladies offer to show me her stables a while back. Gave me the address an' everything."

One of the ladies from a while back. He blinks rapidly in confusion before the image of red nails and lips and copper hair flashes through his head. Curt had said she'd talked to Buck about horses. Surely this isn't the same girl. Surely, Buck's not thinking of actually going.

"You do know that…" He trails off, unsure if he wants to continue and dash the other's hopes or not. "She was probably askin' you to come around and warm her bed, right?"

Buck's mouth tugs down at the corners, belaying his mood. People struggle reading Gale but to John he's always been very expressive. Or maybe he's the only one paying enough attention, looking closer than warranted. And even though he's yet to puzzle out some of his looks, this one's obvious in it's disapproval.

"No," Gale shakes his head, "She ain't like that. We talked about her racehorses and the derby."

"*Buck*," He drawls, throwing his arm around the other's shoulders and shaking him lightly. "My poor, naïve friend. A horse is *not* the only thing she was thinking of ridin' when she was talking with you."

"You're disgusting," Buck shoves him off with a reluctant grin before it drops into something somber. "Her husband was a Major, too. Infantry. Died last year. It's not like that."

"All the more reason," He sighs, falling into step with the other as he heads for the sleeping quarters. "Lonely dame all alone in a big manor, bet she's just waitin' for a strapping, young, American pilot to sweep her off her feet."

"*Bucky*." And oh, there's that tone of warning that John so adores.

"I know, I know." He rolls his eyes, punching him in the shoulder lightly. "You got *Marge* waitin' for you at home." He pauses briefly before continuing with another rowdy grin. "But think about it! Every time you get leave, you have somewhere to go and be with a beautiful girl and her many horses. And she was a real spitfire, turned me down

right proper but you-"

"She ain't like that!" Gale barks, making John jolt in surprise. "Drop it if you know what's good for you."

"Jeez, Buck." He frowns, feeling a little bad about it now. But it's his own way of coping at the prospect of Gale finally talking to a girl, at someone other grasping at him with both hands while he slips through John's. Even if it's not like that, he wanted Buck to spend his leave with him. Not some stuck-up dame with a horse ranch.

A tense silence envelops them as they near their destination. He chews on another jab at the other's love life before settling on something more genuine. There's no use in riling the other up, not about this and John's not willing to push it today.

"So you're not going to London with me?" He refuses to admit to pouting but it's a near thing.

Buck sighs, running a hand through his hair. "How about you come out to Ipswich with me instead?"

He eyes the other warily, wondering why he's offering John the opportunity after all that's left his mouth in the last ten minutes. It's – well. It's not an *unappealing* idea. It's not what he would have wanted form this leave – mainly, getting drunk and a quick fuck – but spending time with Buck outside of the base would still be nice.

"Sure the dame won't mind?"

"If you keep your yapping to a minimum," Buck finally grins and John feels like a weight is lifted off his shoulders. He's stupid to be feeling like this just at the sight of the other's smile and yet – and yet, he is. Daybreak through the clouds while you're flying through them has nothing on the brightness of Gale Cleven's genuine joy.

"Promise I'll be a proper gentleman." He crosses his heart and everything and Buck shakes his head with a chuckle.

"Then go get your kit, we're leaving in an hour." The other smacks him on the back and veers off course, heading somewhere John's not privy to.

With another heaved sigh, he mourns the loss of opportunity he'd have had in London. But, this is good, too. Spending time with Buck's its own reward. And he likes horses just fine. He heads for his bed to

pack a bag, feeling like this might turn out alright in the end. And if not, well, it's only three days, surely this lady has a liquor cabinet somewhere.

The copper-haired dame – *Joan,* as he'd been informed on the drive over – waits for them at the door of her giant, mostly-empty mansion. They see her before she sees them and as they get out of the car, she happily trots down the stairs with a big grin on her face and presses a kiss to Buck's cheek in greeting.

"Gale!" She chirps but then her eyes slide over to John and widen in surprise. Buck, the bastard, hadn't warned her he was tagging along or so it seems. "And Bucky! How was your trip?"

"It was just fine, Joan. Thank you for havin' us." Buck says cordially but John already feels his eye twitching.

"*Joan*, as in, *of Arc?"* He takes her offered hand and kisses the back of it, all smarmy-like.

"*Joan* as in *Joanna*, don't you know we English hate the French?" She purses her lips at him, amused.

"My sincerest apologies, then, *Just Joan.*" He winks at her and Buck snorts.

"Sorry for bringing litter to your doorstep, but I just couldn't seem to shake it on the way over." Gale grips his shoulder a little firmer than strictly necessary, a clear a warning as any.

"Ouch!" He presses a palm to his chest, "Man down!"

Joan bites her lip to suppress a grin at them and then meets John's eyes with that piercing gaze of hers. "I should have expected nothing less. What was it? Never one without the other?" With a wink directed at him, she turns around and waves them up the steps.

"You don't have much luggage so I won't bother the staff, I'll show you to your rooms myself." She pushes open the big, hardwood door of the entrance and they're greeted by the sight of an opulent foyer.

He suppresses a whistle to remain proper and not show his origin too much – even though it must be obvious to someone like Joan. The manor is an absolute dream but John feels like he'd go crazy living alone in a place this big. He is, however, a huge fan of the bed he's

been given for his stay. It feels like it's been a lifetime since he slept on a proper mattress and when he throws himself onto it, it earns him a chuckle from their host.

"This place is massive!"

"Gale's room is right through that door if you get lonely, Major, so don't worry." She points to the right where he assumed a bathroom lie in wait but is apparently where his room connects to Buck's.

"*Gale*, is it? Awfully friendly, the two of you." He can't help but let the words leave the confines of his brain, and even though they don't sound as bitter as he was worried they would, it's still a dead giveaway of what he's thinking.

"Well, I cannot bring myself to call him *Buck,* since that name so obviously belongs to you." She shoots right back, the same razor edge to her tone and he feels electrified at having her match him evenly.

He's about to respond with something equally as catty when the door to the side opens and Buck peeks his head through curiously.

"Oh!" The other grins at them and lets himself further into the room. "Lookin' cozy there, Egan."

"You know how I feel about a thick mattress and good company." He gets up reluctantly, already looking forward to getting a good night's sleep under the plush covers later.

"Ready to go see the horses?" Joan breaks the silent glance volley between him and Gale and the other perks up at the mention.

"Yes, ma'am. It's been quite a while." Gale nods politely, patting his shirt down as if trying to look representable for the *horses*. It's endearing and it makes John second-hand excited right along with him.

"We usually have more of them around," Joan informs them as they exit the manor out the back and start moving across the vast grassy knoll and towards the ranch he can spy in the distance. "But some of them are getting ready for the Epsom Derby at the moment so we only have some of the younger horses around."

"Any chance I can ride one?" Buck asks, a bashful tilt to his head as Joan nods. Looking like that, John can easily imagine him with a wide-brimmed cowboy hat on his head and a bandana tied around his

neck in a neat triangle. He'd be sun-tanned and freckled from patrolling the ranch all day and he'd have a fluffy dog at his side. Cowboy Buck would be every girl's dream, he'd break hearts just by strolling into town and shooting them a drawled *good day, ma'am*.

"This Derby of yours a big deal, then?" He asks to distract himself from the vivid image of Buck that his mind had decided to paint him, leather chaps and all.

"Oh, yes." She nods eagerly. "The Epsom Derby is one of the five classic English races. It has been kept a tradition since the 1600's. It lasts a couple of days and it's a great excuse for the gentry to socialize and get roaring drunk in the middle of the day."

"And with the war?" Gale waves a hand through the air as if he's expecting to see B-17s in the sky above them. "Can't imagine it's going on uninterrupted."

"They've moved it to Newmarket. We're calling it the *New Derby* for the time being but the spirit of the race is the same." Joan sighs, fidgeting with a locket around her neck and it's the first bit of nerves John's seen from her since they've arrived. It makes him feel bad about his earlier conversation with Buck, back at base, but. There's nothing to be done about it now except keep his trap shut and be respectful.

"The Epsom Downs racecourse is being used for anti-aircraft battery," She offers them another tight smile and Buck winces in his periphery.

"You said some of them are off preparing, how are you feeling about your chances this year?"

They've finally approached the stables and he can hear the various sounds of agitated horses from the building. They're mostly brown and black horses, well-muscled and sleek. They look like they've been cared for well but that's as far as his understanding goes.

"Oh, hm." Joan seems to think on it as she approaches the first pen and leads one of the horses out by the bridle. It twitches a little and shakes its head at her but she just smiles. "We have one that should do well, he's a bit of an underdog but I believe in him even if the odds aren't in his favour. His name's *Straight Deal*, so keep an eye out for him in the papers."

"Sounds like a winner already," Buck chuckles, a good-natured sound that draws John's attention from the rest of his surroundings as if he is

nothing but a horse being lead to water.

“These are the two-year-old colts and fillies, we figured they should sit this season out and wait for their opportunity in the three-year-olds’ race next year.” She explains, “This is *Mercy Given*. She’s got a pedigree that I can’t even begin to explain to you, nor one you’d be interested in hearing about.”

“Your efforts would be wasted on us, Joan.” He laments, letting himself lean against the door and watch as Buck approaches the filly. He’s got stars in his eyes and John curses himself for even thinking of trying to drag the other away from this.

There’s a noise of a car coming to a halt outside and a man stumbles into the building, looking harried, holding a hat in his hands and they turn to look at him.

“Charlie!” Joan hurries over to the man, obviously worried. “What’s happened?”

“They need you at the house, Madam, they said it’s urgent.” The man explains and she lets out a groan that sounds a little too frustrated to be polite.

“Apologies, gentlemen, it seems that my assistance is required back at the manor. Charlie, would you please prepare *Mercy* and *Narcissus*, the Majors would like a ride around the estate.” She waves at them before hurrying to where the car is parked and waiting for her.

The man, Charlie, looks a little caught out before he gathers himself and nods to them politely. “Sirs. The horses will be ready shortly.” The man tugs *Mercy* out of Gale’s hold and leads her further into the building.

“She sure did assume you know how to ride,” Buck’s grin is wide and infectious and John can’t help but cracking one of his own.

“What’s that supposed to mean, huh?” He punches the other in the shoulder lightly and Buck dodges out of reach, fishing the container of toothpicks from his pocket and taking one out.

“You’re a city boy, *Wisconsin*. You ever even seen a horse up close?” Gale drawls, laying it on thick with the accent and Bucky feels a fine shudder trying to race up his spine and into the back of his head.

“Course I have, *Wyoming,* they took us to a ranch as kids once.”

Gale laughs at that, the full one that makes all of John's clownery feel like it's worth it. He basks in it for a moment before he has to look away because there's a serious risk of being obvious when the other's like this.

"This is a little bigger than a pony, cowboy." Gale nods to one of the other stalls currently housing a curious black colt that's come out to greet them. "Sure you can handle it?"

"You talk a big game, Buck. How do I know *you're* not just pretending?" He answers the question with one of his own because dwelling on the other's wording isn't helping his personal mission of not being obvious.

"Guess you'll have to find out." The other starts walking to meet Charlie, who's bringing *Mercy* and one other formidable-looking horse over, halfway.

"Think this gorgeous thing can handle his lanky ass?" Gale points to him with a thumb and Charlie smiles sheepishly.

"Of course, Sir. He may be young, but he's plenty strong. Though, jockeys do tend to be a bit on the short side so I suggest not overdoing it." Charlie hands the reins over to Buck and excuses himself with a polite *goodbye*.

"Any, uh, advice?" He approaches the great beast cautiously and it snorts at him, shaking its head. "One cowboy to another?"

"Don't fall off the saddle." Gale quips and hoists himself onto the horse with such frightening ease that leaves Bucky envious.

He eyes the saddle and the stirrups. Logically, he knows what he's supposed to do but it feels daunting regardless. He pats the horse's flank gently and it stirs in his direction as if encouraging him.

"Any day now, John." Buck cajoles and he lifts his eyes to glance at the other with a glare. Except, he's sure he looks like anything other than irritated right about now and it's all Gale's fault.

He's sitting in the saddle like he belongs there. His posture relaxed, shoulders tilted back, the reins in one of his hands while the other rests on a strong thigh and by god, John wishes he could reach out and touch. Instead, he swallows the saliva pooling in his mouth and steps up to the challenge.

Luckily, he's plenty fit so getting himself up on the horse is less of a task than he'd assumed. He wiggles a little in the seat until he finds a comfortable spot and grabs the reins, unsure.

"Does this thing steer itself?" He gives the leather a light tug and the horse makes a circle, causing John to yelp as he has to readjust to keep his balance, thighs burning from the strain of keeping himself in place.

Gale's laughing at him and he can't hide the way his cheeks heat. He hates looking stupid in front of the other but it's not like he'd know how to do this first try.

"We can't all be rugged individuals," He grumbles, handing the reins over to the other when he holds out a hand.

"City boy," Buck practically purrs. It's like being on a horse has brought out a whole different side of him that Bucky's never seen before and it's – it's making him a little sweaty, a little agitated and leaving him *wanting.* And *city boy,* he's said it so gently this time around, so sweetly that he can imagine Buck's mouth shaping different words, can almost hear him saying *pretty boy* instead. He needs a breather already.

"We'll take it slow until you adjust," The other offers and John takes a deep breath, stinking vaguely of hay and manure.

"I feel stupid," He admits as Gale leads his horse slightly behind him. He should be able to do this. He flies planes for a living, for Christ's sake. This is hardly that difficult.

"This is different to a Fort, John."

Nobody's ever accused *John* of being difficult to read.

"It's a living being, it's temperamental. You gotta trust it to do some of the work, can't control it all the time." The other continues as they leave the stables. He's shining golden in the afternoon sun, leaving Bucky momentarily stunned.

"Horses are smart enough, they know what needs to be done. You're just here to switch directions and speed up or slow down."

"*Narcissus*, was it?" He asks the horse inanely, patting the side of its neck. "Just don't buck me off and we'll be aces."

Gale rolls his eyes at him but leads them down a worn path that cuts through a forest. The fact that this is all Joan's estate doesn't escape his mind. Maybe living it up out here wouldn't be so bad if he weren't alone. If Buck was here with him, for example, he wouldn't complain having all this to himself. A pointless dream to have, childish even.

"This is different than riding out into the prairie." Buck mumbles, quiet as to not disturb the various sounds of nature that have enveloped them in their cacophony. "The nature out here is so… *rich*."

"Different with the greenery, huh?" Somewhere to the side, something rustles in the underbrush. The peaceful atmosphere feels almost sacred, he keeps his voice low, too, not wanting to intrude on it.

"I love the sun, but feelin' all this fresh air free of dust in my lungs, it's somethin' else." Buck inhales deeply, closing his eyes and letting the horse trot down the trail on its own for a moment.

Gale might love the sun but John loves seeing Buck like this. He's so obviously in his element, a look not unlike the one he gets when he's in the pilot's seat of his Fort overtaking the smooth neutrality of his usual default expression. He's smiling more as he leads the horses into an easy gallop that has John gripping the pommel for his life.

They break out from the trees and into a vast meadow untouched by the horrors of war. It's almost like stepping into a different world altogether, one where they can just exist peacefully like this. One where half their friends aren't dead or prisoners of war. He feels the ache for it rise in his throat as Gale turns to look at him.

"Sit here, let the horse graze. I'm gonna take *Mercy* for a run." Buck eyes him as if to check if John will suddenly keel over and fall over before setting off at a dead bolt with his own steed. And he's – Bucky loses his breath, eyes widening as he takes in the level of skill Gale seems to possess. Buck's been holding out on him. He watches as the other's hips lift from the seat of the saddle, his thighs working to keep his balance as the horse speeds around the meadow, trampling the wildflowers and scaring the birds up into the air.

And there it is again, that image of Buck with a cowboy hat on his head. Sat astride John this time, instead of the horse. He swallows the saliva pooling in his mouth, feeling like he's parched, like he's stuck in the middle of a desert and Buck is a tall drink he'd like to down. He hears buck give a shout in the distance, pushing the horse faster and it obliges readily. The mare brings them in a wide circle and then

they're riding back toward John and he can feel himself stop breathing altogether as he's faced with Gale's wide grin. It's been ages, almost, since he'd last seen it. Since Buck was loose and free enough to allow it to see the light of day – maybe not since they were last with Marge. *Marge.*

The reminder sobers him up a little, makes him school his features into something less besotted. Something friendlier. And he's back to his usual shit-eating smile by the time Buck pulls up next to him. the horse rises to her hind legs and the other releases a chuckled *whoa, there* before settling down. *Narcissus* remains in his own little world, happy to eat his fill of fresh grass.

"Color me impressed, Buck! Looks like I've got a real Wyoming cowboy in my presence. Should I take a bow? Offer you some tobacco to chew?" Falling back into the teasing mockery is easy even if his words hold sincere admiration in them.

"Been a while," Buck heaves a sigh, chest rising rapidly and John can imagine the speed at which his pulse is pounding. "Nothin' like it out there, Bucky. No better feeling. As close to flying as we get down here."

"I prefer my steeds rations can consistency."

"Spoken like a true metropolis-dweller, *city boy."* Gale winks at him, miming tipping his hat down and John almost fucking whimpers like a damned virgin right then and there. *Get a grip, Egan!*

"Should we be heading back?" He clears his throat, hoping that the pink of his cheeks can be attributed to the sun bathing them in her warmth instead of the heat coming from within him.

Gale runs a hand through his hair and nods, looking somewhat regretful. "Any longer and Joan might worry we got lost."

"Wouldn't entirely mind that," He mumbles, a bit too quiet to be teasing, a little too sincere to be a joke.

He can feel Buck's staring at the side of his head as he adamantly refuses to meet his eye. He's in danger, he knows. He's in danger of spilling his damned guts because all this *frolickin'* around in a damned meadow has him *yearning* like one of those Jane Austen dames, stuck in their gilded cages wishing for freedom. And Gale has to know that something's wrong by this point. Has to know John's one step away from doing something stupid that'll ruin them both. Maybe John more

so than Buck.

“I hate leave, you know.” Gale says instead, earnest in that solemn way of his.

“Yeah?” He tilts his head and nudges the horse to follow after *Mercy*.

“Mm,” The other motions to the forest around them. “Being reminded of everything that’s at stake, of the people suffering, of everything that I can’t have and will lose if I go down in that B-17. This all… it’s awful and I’d rather be at base where there’s no use thinkin’ about things like these. Where I can do some good.”

John swallows down the reflexive joke about Buck being a martyr. He hums in acknowledgment instead, thinking of what to say because he gets it, he does. But that’s also a damned sad way of thinking when they’re fighting for everyone’s lives.

“Can’t mourn what you haven’t lost yet, Buck.”

The other looks back at him, mouth quirking at the corners. There’s something almost *fond* in his eyes and John knows that particular expression. It’s the one directed at him whenever he’s doing something stupid, it’s the one he’s practiced dragging out through trial and error, making a fool of himself until he’d gotten the wanted reaction out of the other.

“Guess not.”

“Besides,” He drawls, “Who else is gonna have my back when I get my hands on Joan’s booze stash?”

“Incorrigible,” Gale rolls his eyes and that smile widens into a beautiful grin.

“Big word for a cow-wrangling simpleton!”

“I’m gonna leave you out here with the horse, Bucky.”

“No – *no*, hey!”

The food in the mess isn’t bad, per se, but it’s got nothing on whatever the hell French dish they’ve just been served by Joan’s butler. He knows that Buck and her are talking about something to the side but he’s too preoccupied with enjoying the food and wine to listen or participate. It’s always like this, he thinks, always eating like it’s your

last meal but with food this good, it feels especially final. *His last meal,* the grim notion entering his brain is almost enough to spoil his appetite (Curt's last meal were scrambled eggs and toast that John stole half of, a measly sendoff).

"And how did you enjoy the ride, John?" Joan's voice reaches and he freezes, looking up from his plate to find them staring at him with equal looks of amusement. He's gotta be looking like a hamster, cheeks full and crumbs around his mouth.

He swallows the food with a wince and uses the nice napkin to wipe his face before speaking, just like his ma' taught him.

"It was a new experience, that's for sure." He smiles politely, feeling uneasy under the scrutiny – *inadequate.*

"I'm surprised," Joan hums, "Gale's told me you're from Wisconsin. Isn't that one of your *cowboy states?"*

And it's a little funny, how her mouth shapes the foreign names like they're not even English. And he'd laugh but he's distracted by the knowledge that Buck's told her about *him.* It seems like a weird thing to share with someone you've just met, is all. It has nothing to do with the sweet little thrill that goes through his stomach and up into his lungs every time someone affirms that Buck thinks about him, too, when they're apart.

"He's a *city boy,* Joan." Buck says at the same time as John gets out a strangled *Volunteered that information, did he?*

Joan's gaze volleys between them for a moment before settling on John again.

"He has, yes." She takes a sip from her glass, the color of the drink the same as her lipstick. "I've always wanted to visit America so I had asked him for a recommendation."

"Told her to stay out of Wisconsin," Buck jabs sharply and Bucky lets out a barked laugh, shaking his head.

"Wouldn't blame you if you did." He nods, tapping his fingers against the hardwood of the table. "I bet he told you East coast, but that's too much like here. I'd say California or maybe even Louisiana as a reprieve from this place."

A funny little smile tilts her mouth and she shares a look with Gale

that Bucky doesn't necessarily like. It's too… *knowing*.

"He told me you'd say that, too."

And *fuck*. Not only did Gale talk about him, he knows him well enough to offer John's own thoughts as if he were a part of the conversation. That little thrill turns into a roaring fire, stoked by the sheer notion of Buck knowing him so well. It should be terrifying, being flayed open like this, but Bucky's always been a sucker for an adrenaline rush, always flew a little too close to the sun for everyone's liking.

"Adding *prophet* to your list of saintly attributes, are you, Buck?" He kicks out with his foot and his boot meets Gale's under the table, the nudge landing a little too soft to be called playful violence.

"You're the only one that thinks I'm a saint, John." The other rolls his eyes and Joan giggles at the two of them.

He feels… *juvenile* almost. He feels like the three of them are stuck in a film of their own. One where he's free to be as corny and flirty with Gale as he wants to. Somehow, he doesn't think Joan would mind at all. If she weren't obvious in the way she'd turned him down that first time, the tone of her voice, her words, then it's the way she's looking at them like she's known them forever now.

"Can't let you sully yourself by walkin' the same grounds as the rest of us peasants. Someone has to build that pedestal for you." He winks, once again skirting too close to the surface – the devotion threatening to break the tension and breach into the air above like a whale leaping out of the ocean.

"Such a way with words, John! Are you sure you're a soldier and not a poet?" Joan comes to his rescue when it looks like Gale will just continue staring at him with wide eyes.

"They do say the pen is mightier than the sword, but thankfully, I have a B-17 instead." The joke is a little too cheesy for his own tastes but it does make Joan snort inelegantly which is a win in his books.

"You said you want to go to the good ol' US of A; any particular reason or just as a tourist?" He fishes for something to talk about because Gale still hasn't fucking said anything and John is *sweating* under the stiff collar of his shirt.

Something in her eyes shifts and a long sigh leaves her lips. "If you

had asked me before today, before the war, I would have said yes to the tourist part but now…" She trails off and takes another sip of her drink. "They're commandeering the manor for the war efforts."

"What?" Buck's voice is loud and abrupt. "They're takin' your house?"

"Yes," She slumps back into the high-backed chair. "They need buildings for hospitals, for officer barracks, headquarters, the like. They've already taken over the school building in Ipswich proper. That is what that mess was about earlier. A man came to inform me that I have ten days to find accommodations elsewhere. Ordered by the Prime Minister himself."

"But that's-!" He slams his hand onto the underside of the table in his hurry to get up, enraged. He's heard of this happening, obviously. But usually, it was empty estates whose owners fled before the war reached this far in. It was business-owned estates and schools and hospitals. Not a house that is someone's home, someone's sanctuary.

"It's alright, John." She chuckles listlessly. "Well, it's not, but. If this is what my country requires of me then I will do my best to oblige. It's what my husband would have done, what he would have wanted. And, besides, it's not forever."

It's starting to feel *like forever,* John doesn't say but he knows by the look in Buck's eye that he's thinking the same.

"So you're thinking of packing up for America?" Gale reaches out and briefly squeezes her forearm, a gesture that she seems to appreciate.

"Yes," Joan nods, looking a little brighter at the prospect of travelling even if under such circumstances. "It seems like the time to do it. Who knows, maybe I like it so much that you lot will see me there once you get back."

It's a nice sentiment even if the three of them all know an empty one. There are no guarantees in war. There is no certainty in life except for the fact that they'll die one way or another. But it's a nice dream to hold, a better future to look forward to; him and Buck and Joan meeting up in a shitty bar over an even shittier beer, trading stories like old friends. *A future worth fighting for.*

Eventually, Gale leaves with Charlie to help tend to the horses because of course he does and John's left with their host. Inexplicably, he feels like he's walking into a trap as she brings out the good scotch and pours him more than two fingers into a crystal glass.

“When my late husband, Percival, and I got married, it wasn’t for love.” She starts and John can see the walls closing in as she rounds the corner of the big table to sit next to him instead of at the head.

“Oh. You, um, seem like you loved him anyway.” He shifts in his seat uncomfortably, palm damp where it’s cradling the glass.

“I did, yes. Eventually, I came to love him as an integral part of my life.” She taps the locket hanging against her chest. “But it was still an arrangement orchestrated by our parents. These things are incredibly common amongst the upper echelon of the British society.”

“The stuffy old fucks force you lot to marry out of some sense of duty?” He grimaces, imagining how he’d react if this was his situation. He’d probably start swinging.

“An *interesting* way of phrasing it but yes.”

There’s a moment of pause like she’s gathering up courage for something before she continues.

“And even though I loved Percy, I wasn’t *in love* with him, you see.” She leans back and takes a big gulp of her drink. “No, he didn’t necessarily have what I was looking for in a… *lover*.”

“*Joan,*” He warns lightly as he leans back in his chair, he thinks that he’s finally realized where this spiel of hers is heading and he’s not sure he likes it.

“I want you to be happy, John.” She clinks her glass against where Bucky’s clutching his.

“You don’t even know me,” He bites back, grimacing as the drink burns on its way down and settles heavily in his gut.

“No, I suppose not.” Joan smiles gently, reaching up to run her fingers through his loose curls in a very motherly gesture. “But… *it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a kind heart, must be in want of someone to give it to*.”

“That’s not how that one goes,” He says weakly, leaning into the touch because it feels akin to *benediction*. He wonder if this is what the horses feel like when she cares for them, if they are allowed to be free under her watchful eye.

In a perfect world, one without the war, one where he has a

respectable job – a stable career, where he's made a name for himself without killing people for his country, one where his *kind heart* didn't wholly belong to one Gale 'Buck' Cleven, he thinks that he could have loved her. They would have made a terrific couple, he knows it, but this is not a perfect world and this stupid heart of his *does* wholly belong to Buck. *His* Buck that he named as his own so that whenever one is without the other, the people will ask; so that whenever the syllable of Buck's name leaves anyone's mouth, he's right there responding in tandem.

"I can't," John sucks in a sharp breath, feeling the tears gather. And when has he become so soft? Is it because under her watchful gaze, he, too, is free?

"I may never have my chance with all of these *stuffy old fucks* breathing down my neck, but, John." The tone of her words is chiding even if friendly. "Tomorrow may never come, and maybe the tomorrow that greets us will be better than today. You cannot know for certain what is waiting for you, so allow yourself the chance to choose happiness."

"He-" John swallows down the rest of his whiskey, feeling faintly like he might throw up as it rushes into his head. "Risking too much, doll, you know that." His smile is shaky at best, watery at worst but he goes for it anyway.

"We're at wartime, *love*." She retaliates, the gentlest of croons accompanying the word and he has to close his eyes as she pries him open layer after layer. A carefully constructed prison toppling like a house of cards. "Man up and tell him, don't dwell on the *what if*s."

He would have had an easier time accepting a mission from command that had him placed dead center in Hitler's house with a gun in his hand than what she's telling him. He doesn't have to listen to her, of course, but today's been – it has been something out of one of his wildest fantasies. And thinking about having this again even if in small fractions of the full thing, in just Gale's smiles, well. It makes him want to do that stupid thing he's avoided doing up until this point.

She swipes her thumb under his eye and fixes his hair where she'd ruffled it out of place. The gentle look she's sending him is making him feel lighter than air and like maybe he *could* just tell Gale. Then again, that might be the good scotch talking instead.

“Am I really that obvious?” He heaves a sigh and she laughs, bell chimes turning into the banging of pots and pans as she loses the stiff control on her tone for a moment.

“Do you want me to lie?” Joan quips and he thuds his head against the backrest with a long groan.

“I’m kidding, John.” She pats his cheek. “Call it a woman’s intuition. Plus, you seem like the possessive type. I mean, *really*, giving him your name?”

“He looked like a Buck I knew back home.” Crossing his arms over his chest, he insists.

“And did you have a schoolboy crush on this Buck, too, or?”

“No-”

The scotch has long since left his system by the time he’s lying in bed that night and yet he keeps repeating her words inside his head. She’s right in some ways, of course, and John’s never been more aware of his own mortality than when he remembers all of the friends he’s lost to the war so far. And what if tomorrow it’s Buck? What if he’s cursed to wake up tomorrow and see the other’s empty bunk first thing in the morning instead of his ruffled bedhead (if John manages to wake up early enough)? But, there’s also a chance of losing Buck here and now if he crosses that invisible line.

And as if called forth by Bucky’s internal turmoil, the loud beating of his heart and the warbling of his brain, Buck appears at the door that joins their rooms together (an intentional choice on Joan’s part, in retrospect).

“Can’t sleep?” He asks, clearing his throat as Buck trudges in on light, bare feet.

“Nah,” The other sits down onto the edge of the bed and John scoots over to make room for him even though the mattress is wide enough to fit three people.

“Anything in particular?” Turning to face the other on his side, he watches as Buck settles above the covers, startlingly aware that he’s shirtless in the other’s presence now.

“I hate leave,” The other grumbles, lowering his eyes to somewhere

around John's exposed collarbones.

"You said," He raises an eyebrow that's barely visible in the faint light provided by the singular lamp that he'd left on across the room.

"I'm gonna miss this when we go back," Gale admits, fingers spreading on the sheet, in the scant few inches between them, flexing, leaving John a little mesmerized.

"You sure are fond of horses, Buck."

The other rolls his eyes, wrinkling his nose as John flicks him on the forehead. "I've told you about my pa', right?"

"Mm," He settles down, knowing this won't be an entirely happy story, not if the other's father is involved.

"We used to have a few horses of our own, not really a ranch like this, only a mare and two of her colts. Work horses, not much for speed. The mare was the color of honey, cream mane, calm, noble thing, *kind*." Buck's voice rasps on the last word and John's ensnared.

"One of her colts looked like a Paint, Overo, same honey base with white markings." The other motions to his own face, covering his right eye and dragging his hand down the side of his neck and his ribs. "Patterned like a mountain range, playful, loved chasin' the barn cats around."

"Sounds pretty," He forces his eyes away from where Buck's shirt has rucked up to reveal a sliver of skin. "And the other one?"

"The other one came out lookin' darker than the night. Pitch black and smattered with tiniest white dots all over. Unruly, angry at everyone, entire town knew he was no good. Kicked pa' in the shin once and almost broke his leg." The grin Gale offers is unrepentant and John wants to say *good, he deserved worse* but he keeps his mouth shut.

"Hated everyone except for, eventually, me." The other's knees draw up, tucking his hands under his arms. "He was the first horse I trained on my own. Named him Rascal. Took him to shows, paraded him around even if he hated it because I wanted everyone to see him, to see what I'd managed to do."

"Sounds like he was a riot."

“Yeah,” Buck shudders, briefly closing his eyes. “I loved that damned horse even if he gave me two concussions before I could even ride him properly.”

He’s afraid to ask but he has to. He has to, otherwise Buck will retreat into himself and this won’t ever be mentioned again and John can’t have that happening, not tonight. Not here where they have privacy and freedom.

So he asks, “What happened?”

“Gambling’s always been a rich man’s sport, you know.” The other curls in on himself and John reaches out automatically, slipping a hand under the other’s head and tangling his fingers within blonde locks. Gale’s breath hitches but he seems to gather himself back up.

“Came home from school one day to find some burly guy with a truck takin’ him and the Paint away, my father standing in the back and doing nothing.” Another shudder wracks the other’s frame and has John gritting his teeth, wishing he could get his hands on Gale’s damned pa’.

“The Paint went easy, hooked right next to the man’s own in the back. But Rascal didn’t want to go, no. *No*. Rascal knew which sorry bastard he belonged to, who broke three of his fingers trying to fit a saddle on him the first time.” The other pauses and John can feel dread welling up in his chest as possible scene after scene races through his head.

“Rascal, fury in his pale devil eyes, lashes out like it’s his God-given right. Knocks the man over, stomps on him and if you’ve ever been kicked by a horse, you know it’s like bein’ hit by a car.” Gale wipes at his eyes and John pretends he doesn’t see it for both their sakes. “He must have broken something because the man’s screaming on the ground now and two more rush out of the truck. One of them starts cursin’ up a storm but my father’s fulfilled his end of the deal, gave ‘em the horses to pay off his debt, he’s got nothing to do with this anymore. And *I* can’t do anything either, weighed barely more than a hundred pounds soaking wet even at fourteen.”

“Buck,” He hushes and the other shakes his head, stubborn to see the story through.

“The cursin’ one, old man, thick mustache, looks down at the injured fuck and pulls out a gun. I swear, I saw my life flash before my eyes and I’d *hoped* that – but the man aims the gun at Rascal instead. He pulls the trigger like it’s nothin’. Like it’s not a life, like-” The tears

finally break loose.

Whatever he thought the other was going to say, this wasn't it.

"Shit, *Gale*." He rushes up, detangling himself from the covers and enveloping the other in a hug, letting him cry silently into the crook of his neck.

"Loved that stupid horse, Bucky." Gale mumbles against his skin, words barely discernable from how hard he's shivering in John's arms.

"Jesus, Buck." He hisses, "That's fucked."

"Cared for the mare until she got sick and died two years later," The other continues faintly, persistent. "Was the last of the horses we've ever had. Too expensive, not worth the trouble. Worked on a couple of ranches later but nothing was the same after."

All in spite of all that, Gale still loves horses and being around them. Still loves the base cats and Meatball, loves sneaking them food, loved the horses near the base in Texas and loved riding out on *Mercy* today. If John wasn't already gone on the guy.

"I don't know why they put you in a Fort when you're obviously more fit for the Red Cross with your bleedin' heart." He snorts gently, holding the other while he calms down gradually.

"Been years," The other grumbles, hands pressed flat against John's bare back. "Should be over it by now."

"That's stupid," He tugs lightly on the other's hair and Buck pinches him in retaliation. "Grief has no expiration date. You were just a kid; that shit sticks with you. Thank you for tellin' me, even if it's not a nice story."

"Still think about it sometimes," Gale admits, "When I can't sleep like this. Keep turning it over in my head, wonderin' what I could have done different."

"Hey," He grunts, pulling back slightly to meet the other's red-rimmed eyes. "Nothing to be done by a damned kid. Little Gale Cleven, not even *Buck* yet. What was it? Hundred pounds soaking wet? Would have been knocked on your ass faster than you can say *Casper, Wyoming.*"

Gale smiles. It's a small thing, fragile and a shadow of his usual one,

but it's not the grim frown from earlier either.

"You're a good listener, John Egan." Buck closes his eyes then, relaxing still half in Bucky's arms, bumps on his exposed forearms from the chill of the English night.

"Tired?" He asks and Buck nods, already on his way to dreamland. "Alright, g'night, Buck."

"Night, Bucky."

He manages to unearth one of the blankets from behind him and throws it over the both of them, decidedly not thinking about how the other had fallen asleep in his arms. He mulls the story over for a few more minutes, wishing Gale's pa' was still alive so that John could strangle him himself before deeming it futile to stew over something so far in the past. Instead, he brings himself a little closer to Buck guiltily and falls asleep right there with him.

He thinks he's dreaming at first.

The birds singing in the distance, the gentle light streaming in through a too-big window and hitting his face at an odd angle, the warm body plastered to his side and half across his chest. It's a nice dream, pleasant. John doesn't get many of those these days. They're often replaced by the sound of flak hitting the Fort, by the screams of his fellow soldiers, by Buck being shot down and lost to him forever. *Buck.*

His eyes snap open and he looks down abruptly. He's met with the sight of a mop of blonde hair filling most of his vision, unruly and spiked in various directions.

The warm body plastered to his side is Gale. He sucks in a sharp breath as he takes stock of all the places that they're touching.

The other's head is on his pec, his ear getting a front row seat to how Bucky's heart has started rabbiting inside his ribcage. His arm is around Buck's shoulders and in turn, Buck has his own thrown over John's waist. There's also a heavy thigh crooked over his hip. He's never been more aware of every single nerve in his own body than in this moment. He has to move. He has to get away before he does something devastatingly stupid like kiss the top of Buck's head, pull his thigh up higher, roll into his embrace – any number of things he actually wants to do.

Instead, he stays still and stares out the window, listens to the birds, and hopes that the other doesn't take this the wrong way when he wakes up.

It takes a while for Gale to come to. The previous evening in combination with the half-sleepless night having obviously caught up with him. He rouses from his sleep slowly, shifting minutely, his hand tightening on John's bare hip because John's still shirtless. A quiet hum cuts off abruptly and Bucky closes his eyes, bracing for the eventual separation as Buck realizes the position they're in. He mourns the loss already.

"Y'die during the night?" Buck rasps, voice low and scratchy from sleep and John feels the heat trying to coil in his gut, trying to rush lower.

"Not yet," He responds lightly. There's no way Gale can't hear the pounding of his heart, there's no way he can mistake it for anything else.

"Good, good." The other mumbles nonsensically and pats his stomach, making him clench up, before rolling away and off the bed. "Breakfast." He says as if it's the most pressing thing to worry about.

John watches as the other stumbles across the room and into his own, sleep pants hanging low on his hips, the divots above the waistband enticing.

Well. That could have gone worse, he supposes. With a mighty groan and a rough scrubbing of his fingers all over his face, he gets up as well. There's a day to seize and he's not going to waste it by letting his stupid pining get the better of him.

He wobbles out of the room and heads to where the bathroom is located, but almost crashes into Anna, one of the maids in his still-sleepy, eyes half closed, ambling.

"Oh!" She jolts away from him, dropping the sheets she'd been carrying. "My apologies! I didn't see you there, sir."

"'S my fault, still half asleep. No worries." He crouches down and helps her gather the cloth up, stacking the ones he got into a neat pile and handing it over. He meets her eye and she blushes bright red, the color obvious on her pale complexion.

"Thank you, you shouldn't have bothered yourself with them, sir." She

smiles bashfully and he winks back at her, making the blush spread to her ears, too. It's satisfying in a way, to know that even if he's gone on Buck, he can still charm the help.

"I make sure I clean all my messes up," He's – well, he's not earnest about the flirting, not really. But he can't help the thrill of knowing how easily he can fluster someone, the validation he feels from the fact that he can have them swooning. He's about to try and maybe compliment her, try and distract himself from the imprint of Buck's body against his own when a sound catches his attention.

He turns towards the general area the noise had come from, curious. The door opening reveals Buck leaving his own room, dressed for the day in his uniform slacks and a loose but still neatly pressed, beige button up. The other pauses, staring at them and John realizes that he's standing quite close to Anna while she's gazing up at him, *mooning*.

"Ah, good morning mister Cleven." She offers politely with a half-aborted bow and Buck grimaces at the title.

"Just *Buck*'s fine," He informs her and Gale rolls his eyes.

"Breakfast," The other repeats his earlier nonsense and heads for the bathroom that John had been going to.

"There another bathroom round here?" He asks Anna because he's *not* waiting outside of the door while Gale does his business.

"Yes, of course! Just down the hall on this side. If you will," She motions with her head because her arms are full. She's cute, he has to admit, but the look in Gale's eyes as he the two of them in keeps nagging on him. It keeps digging deeper into his brain until it's all he can think about. Until he's standing in front of the wide mirror trying to imitate it as he washes his teeth. But his face isn't made for looks like that, too stretchy and distinct, a large nose and a grin that curls – not sculpted by the angels themselves, never truly placid.

With a sigh, he resolves himself to putting it into one of those manila folders inside his head labeled *Buck Things*.

Joan's already in the lavish dining room by the time they arrive – separately, each somehow having taken a different path down to the ground floor. She eyes them warily before directing an accusatory stare John's way that he elects to ignore.

“Do you boys fancy taking a trip today?” She asks once they’re seated.

“Where to?” Buck nods to the servers putting the food down in front of him, looking intrigued at the prospect of a daytrip.

“The River Orwell,” Joan grimaces at her coffee before passing the mug to John, having obviously picked up the wrong one. “I was hoping you would be up to taking the horses. I can have the staff pack us lunch and it’s been warm for days now, might even have a dip.”

“How much ridin’ is that?” He winces at the prospect of spending too much time on a horse. He’s not sore yet, but he can tell that his entire lower half would be paying the price if they had gone any faster yesterday.

“Hour and a half at a leisurely pace,” She smirks and John immediately begins worrying. “Less if we go faster.”

He gulps down half of his bitter, black coffee and lets it shock him into wakefulness. He’d hoped leave would be a little less *active* for him but – but seeing that spark return to Buck’s eyes has him biting back his complaints.

“If I fall off and brain myself, you’ll be hearing from my CO.” He quips and Joan laughs, flicking him on the nose.

“I’m sure Gale will help you out if you ask him nicely.” She teases, turning to the man in question who looks a little caught out before schooling his features into something more amicable.

“He did good yesterday, I’m sure he can handle some speed. S’all in the hips, Bucky, you’ll get it quick.” The grin directed his way does nothing to staunch the fondness bleeding out of John’s every pore.

“If you insist,” He relents because of course he’ll go. He’ll follow Buck to hell and back, in a Fort, on a horse or barefoot. There was never any doubt about that.

“Still haven’t told him?” Joan sidles up next to him, slowing her own horse, *Orchid,* down as Buck races up ahead of them, picking up speed rapidly.

“Timing wasn’t right,” He winces, thinking about the story the other had shared with him last night.

“Didn’t take you for a coward, Major.” She snorts and he imagines this is what having an older sister is like.

“Tonight, maybe.” He says it to get her off his back mostly, but the moment the words are out in the air like that, acknowledged, they start weighing on him. It becomes a burden, it becomes an obligation – something to follow through on. He sighs, now he’s done it.

“I’ll hold you to that,” She raises her head, haughty as she makes her promise.

He should have kept his damned mouth shut. Now Joan’s going to be on his case, too.

Buck doubles back and John drags his glare away from their host in order to observe the other. Buck’s loose and relaxed, one hand on his thigh the other holding the reins at the horn of the pommel. He’s a fucking vision, is what he is and John’s breathless. That cowboy fantasy of his manifests in the front of his brain again and he imagines himself in it this time, too. He’d be some sort of troublemaker, a bounty hunter, maybe, takin’ justice into how own hands. Joan’s saying something to his right, making Buck grin and then, because he wasn’t paying attention at all, John almost drops from the horse when they start picking up speed.

“Less staring, more steering!” Joan laughs and Bucky grapples with the reins, lifting out of the saddle a bit like Buck had shown him, moving with the motions of the horse.

They reach the riverbank quickly after, John’s heart beating too fast, his brain buzzing from the rush of air as they’d sped down the dirt road.

“You alright up there, Bucky?” Gale calls, already off *Mercy* and tethering her to a nearby tree.

He gives the other a thumbs-up, wheezing as he slides off of *Narcissus.* “Aces, Buck.”

“Give him a few, he must be sore.” Joan teases, taking the reins from John and winking as she takes the horse away.

He bends down, hands on his knees as his legs shake. That was, well, certainly an experience. He’s not sure he’d like a repeat, but there’s still the trip back to the manor later on. He hopes they take it easier. He finally takes a deep breath and looks around. It’s a nice day, a little

cloudy but sunny none the less. The river courses lazily in front of him, the shore low and a little sandy but behind them is a low forest. He thinks they're wild apple trees, thinks he can spy small green and red fruits between the leaves. The water itself is murky but the heat beating down on him has him already stripping to his undershirt.

"Equestrianism isn't for the faint of heart." Joan mocks lightly, spreading a blanket over the ground, just shy of the sand and on the grass.

"You up for a swim, Bucky?" Gale ambles over with all the confidence of someone who knows that he can command men just by meeting their eye.

"Sure, I am. I'm warning you, though, I'm a much better swimmer than I am a horse rider." He shucks off the undershirt as well, flexing a little with a wink thrown at Joan who rolls her eyes at him, busying herself with a book she'd brought along.

"Oh? You plannin' on racing me? Also, that's not saying much." Buck laughs as John punches him in the shoulder, tugging briefly on his button-up and plucking at a button.

"Off with it, then. The water's waitin'."

It's a race to getting down to their skivvies from then. They push each other around, kick up sand as they run down the shore and he almost trips Buck up but the other leaps over his leg, ducking out of his reach with all the grace of a dancer rather than a fighter. But when they hit the river and Gale pauses from the shock of the cold water, John makes the executive decision to tackle him. They go under with a big splash, the frigid drink rushing up round them much like the warm air had. The other lets out a yell and bubbles erupt from his mouth. He uses the grip he has on the other's waist to haul him bodily out of the water.

"John Egan!!" Buck screams, laughter hidden in the sound and Bucky feels light as a feather.

"Gonna throw you!" He declares, rotating his upper body to gain momentum but Buck twists just at the last moment, bringing both of his hands to John's shoulders and scrambling up his hip like he's nothing but a wily tree. It's enough to stun him, all that skin contact, and it's enough pause for the other to dunk him under the surface.

It's almost peaceful, being held under like that, the world quiet and

only the beating of his own heart accompanying his wandering mind. He relaxes, lets Buck drop in after him now that he doesn't have any resistance holding him up. They meet eyes in the murky depths and John smiles, not minding the water getting into his mouth, fighting against the current. He always felt like that a little, beating back forces of nature. But he wasn't alone this time, Buck's arms anchoring him and keeping him steady.

His lungs start burning and he pokes the other in the middle of his chest, pointing up. Gale releases him and then John's dragging them up. They take gulping breaths of air in tandem, his hand still firmly on Buck's bicep, holding on for dear life. Once the spots clear from his eyes, he sees that Joan's gotten up and is standing at the shore in her sundress, hands on her hips.

He waves at her, waves her over but she just shakes her head.

"Can't have that, now, can we?" He click his tongue and Gale makes a half-hearted effort at stopping him before he's darting out the water and heading for her instead.

"No – John, no!" She screeches as he picks her up. She's light, lighter than Buck had been when he'd tackled him and even as she squirms and protests, he dips her into the water easily.

"You bastard!" Joan curses but it's accompanied by a peal of laughter that sets John off, laughing with his head thrown back until he's lightheaded. It seems to him like it's been ages since he'd felt this carefree, since he could just enjoy nature and the company of friends. No pretenses, no rank, no war looming over them, no burning need for a drink. This is something pure, something that he'll cherish till his last moments.

"Can't take you boys anywhere," She huffs, pushing copper strands off her forehead, red lipstick smudged and her dress clinging to her skin. And it's – he's happy, he realizes. This is what the light in his chest is, he's finally fucking happy – the hollowness filled out for once.

"Don't you know he's the rebel on base?" Gale offers her a hand, pulling her away from John and guiding her to shore now that she's thoroughly soaked.

"He's a troublemaker, is what that one is." Tone fond, she wags her finger at him and John lets the feeling was over him. Gale joins her on the shore and starts fussing around the horses.

He stays, though, floats on his back, lets the current carry him downstream for a bit before swimming back to their spot. It's a good workout but he gets tired fairly quickly and as the sun starts lowering, he finally emerges from the water.

"Hungry?" Joan offers him a ridiculously large sandwich and John's stomach growls as if summoned, making the two of them chuckle.

"Starvin'," He sits down onto the blanket, getting water all over the two of them as he shakes his head.

"Bad dog," Gale flicks him on the forehead and Bucky feels a little insane with how much he loves this man. It blindsides him. It takes him by the scruff and shakes him, pierces him right between the ears, right in the middle of his heart. He must make some sort of noise because the two of them turn to look at him with matching expressions of confusion.

"What kind?" He manages to choke out, taking a bite of the food to keep his mouth occupied.

"What?"

"You said *'bad dog'*, what kind of dog am I? What breed?" He can see Joan fighting back a guffaw, taking a sip of her tea instead.

"Hm," Gale leans a little closer to him, observing his face in a way that makes John entirely too self-conscious about how stupid he looks. "With all those freckles? A Dalmatian for sure."

"A hunting dog, a guard dog, a war dog. Loyal but aloof with strangers." Joan hums, "A good choice."

"You train dogs, too?" He turns to her instead, afraid that he'll combust under Buck's scrutiny.

"Dalmatians were a status symbol once, we had a few when I was growing up." She elaborates with a shrug. "I've always had a fondness for animals; horses, cats, dogs. If I was allowed in the library, I was reading about them."

"Is that what rich people do? Read?" He nudges Buck, "Bet she's never thrown a baseball."

"If I could've avoided it, I wouldn't have either." The other rolls his eyes, good-natured despite the jab at John's hobbies.

“No wonder you two get along so well,” He grumbles, accepting the beer bottle Joan hands him from the basket. “Boring old people down to your core.”

“Just jealous of my vast knowledge, Egan, admit it.”

And it’s not every day that Buck relaxes enough to tease him back. It’s not often that he gives away just how sharp his wit actually is. And whenever it happens, John is reluctant to bite back in fear of having the other go all quiet and enigmatic on him again. So more often than not, he falls back on being genuine instead.

“Most days I’m glad you’re there to do the thinkin’ for me,” He watches as Gale realizes that John’s not joking watches how he looks away, bashful all of a sudden. Unable to take a compliment even if veiled in the cloak of something else.

The rest of the afternoon is spent lazing at the riverbank, drying off. Joan shares gossip with them, stories about the British upper crust that have Gale clutching at his head and John hacking up a lung laughing.

And when the sun’s dangerously low on the horizon and they have to start heading back, he’s reluctant to do so. Reluctant to part with this serenity, with this glimpse into what life could be – idyllic and peaceful.

“You alright, John?” Buck, bringing *Narcissus* over to him, asks, gentle as always when those particular words leave his beautiful mouth.

“Yeah,” He sighs. “Days like these… makes you wonder, you know?”

“Bout the war?”

“About life, what it could be, what it’s not.” He shrugs as Gale nods, handing the reins over.

“Can still be like this after,” The other sounds optimistic but John knows it’s for his sake only, that Buck’s trying to cheer him up. And he appreciates it, he does but.

“Not sure about that one, but we can still hope.” He pats the other on the shoulder, letting it linger a little before hoisting himself onto the horse with more ease than previously.

“The good thing about knowing so many rich people is,” Joan pushes open a set of double door with flourish, revealing a large hall or some sort, basked in the glittering lights of the singular chandelier. “You get given things that you never would buy for yourself.”

“This a ballroom?” He can’t help but ask, feeling dwarfed by the sheer size of the room.

“Yes, but it is in the process of being converted into a mess hall. Hence the tables.” She guides them to where a grand piano sits innocently under a white sheet. He expects her to reveal the piano to them but she pulls a box out from under it instead. He watches as she brings another one out and recognizes a collection of records.

“Now you’re speakin’ my language,” He shuffles closer eagerly, rifling through the songs and albums on offer as she opens the portable gramophone.

“Gale, can you fetch a bottle from the cabinet back there?” She waves to some glass monstrosity across the room and Buck nods amicably, doing as ordered like a good soldier. Joan’s eyes flash to his own as soon as Buck’s out of earshot and she drags him down by the nape.

“If you let this chance slip through your fingers, John Egan, I’ll see to it that you’re banned from every pub in the country.” She threatens and Bucky gulps, certain that she’s not joking or bluffing.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now, pick a record!”

He settles on something jovial first, something light and cheery. The music echoes around the room oddly and he realizes that the acoustics were probably made with live performers in mind. But it’s good either way, he loves music. Joan pours them drinks and then it’s an actual party – even if it’s a small one.

They switch out the records every once in a while, Buck – on the count of not dancing, delegated to this task instead of John who’d prefer to do it himself. But he’s too busy dancing and Joan’s one hell of a partner. She leads him through a few ballroom dances for fun, laughing when he stumbles over himself at the complicated twists and turns. He throws her around a little when some of his songs come around and she yelps with the motions of a dance he’s more acquainted with, the steps he could do in his sleep.

The familiar sound of jazzy trumpets of *One Girl & Two Boys* reaches him and he lights up the same time Buck groans loudly.

“Buck,” He grins.

“No.”

“Buck, I’m gonna need your help on this one.” Pleading’s never worked before but here, in this safe little space they’ve created together, he thinks it just might.

“Come on, Gale, it’s been ages since I’ve done this!” Joan goads as well and he sees the moment Buck gives in, shoulders slumping and shaking his head from side to side.

“Had to be the swing out.”

And then they’re off, bouncing Lady Joanna between the two of them as if they’re nothing more than a part of a larger party at an officer’s club instead of a great big manor. Her skirt flies as he spins her into Buck’s arms, the other more reserved in his movements than John who’s giving it his all but there’s a grin on his face regardless and Bucky’s never felt more alive. They flip her and she laughs as she lands back down between them, spinning again and clinging to him until he lifts her up and she pops down with a clack of her heels, into Buck’s arms then away – and. And then it’s him and Buck doing the dancing instead, Joan having extracted herself from the trio. His heart jumps into his throat; Buck’s hands in his. John, spinning the other and switching places with him like he would with a dame. The song comes to an end but before they can separate, it’s replaced by a slower one, a softer tune.

He looks at Buck and Buck’s mouth tugs up at the corners as they keep standing close together. *A sinner Kissed An Angel,* he thinks as Harry James drones on in that crooning tone of his.

“I know I’m no Meatball, but, may I have this dance?” It’s easier to get the words out than he’d anticipated. They escape his lips in a hushed tone, reverent almost and Buck looks to the side before nodding and letting John take the lead.

It’s not only a slow song, it’s a *romantic* one as well. He gently embraces the other, his hand on Gale’s waist, the other cradling a warm palm. John spins them in gentle circles, swaying with the song’s rhythm, almost tripping over himself when Buck lays his head on his shoulder. There’s rain outside, it’s drizzling lightly and he’s – he’s lost

to the moment. He lets the music overtake his senses, enjoying the other's proximity, how well he follows John's movements despite being used to leading. How perfectly he fits into John's arms.

The song comes an end, the needle skipping off the record and leaving them in silence, in each other's arms.

"What do you say? Better than the dog, huh?" His voice is barely louder than a whisper, tentative and easy so he doesn't disrupt the moment – a familiar scene, Buck trusting him to do this time and time again. He'd cut off his own arm before failing him.

"John," The other lifts his head and meets his eyes in the dim light of the room. There's a faint scar above his left eyebrow and Bucky wonder if he got it in a Fort or from Rascal. It might be selfish, staying here in the moment and luxuriating in such safety when men are out there fighting and dying. But nobody ever said John Egan was a good person.

"Knew you could dance, Buck. Just needed the right partner." The words ring familiar and he remembers overhearing a conversation ages ago, a lifetime ago. A conversation between Buck and – and Marge. *Marge.*

He clears his throat, prying himself away from Buck and his enticing warmth. How could he have forgotten? Stupid, *stupid.* He's grateful Joan's made herself scarce, that she's not here to see him fail like this.

"Thanks for the dance, handsome." He smiles, hoping it covers how miserable he feels, how much the reminder had shocked his system.

"Not gonna walk me to my house? Make sure I get home safe?" Buck's voice is clear, sure, but there's something there that John can't pin down.

He raises an eyebrow, hating having to prolong his own torture but unable to separate himself from the other fully, yet.

"Where are my manners? Right this way," He motions with his hand and they stroll through the silent manor like a pair of ghosts haunting the place.

They pause in front of Buck's door. The scant few inches of height between them were always something that John boasted over but right now, they're giving him trouble because Gale won't meet his eye.

Gale clears his throat, lifting his gaze up and stopping it somewhere around Bucky's chin. There are strands of blonde hair curling delicately down over his forehead, obscuring half his face and John wants to sweep them aside, grip his chin and make him look up.

"I had a nice time, Bucky." Gale says like he's actually one of John's dames and he has to breathe out through his nose heavily in order to stop the hitching of his breath from being heard. "Not too shabby for a city boy."

And then – *and then,* Buck leans up and presses the lightest of kisses to his cheek, leaving him stunned and utterly confused.

"G'night," The other enters his room and leaves John out in the hall, still as a statue and unable to come to terms with what just happened.

"Uh," He says into the silent hallway, stumbling down to his own door, a hand cradling his own cheek as if he can preserve the warmth that the other's peck had left. There's no mistaking it, Gale had given him a kiss on the cheek. After John'd escorted him to his room. After they slow danced together like they were the last two people on Earth.

He makes his way to the bed, collapsing onto his back and staring up at the fresco on the ceiling, the gilded trimming, the moonlight spilling in through the French doors. He turns the events of that evening, these past two days, over and over in his head. He repeats conversations, snippets of looks, the teasing words.

City boy, said like it was something else, a drawl deeper and more prominent than it usually is. Waking up with Gale in his arms like it's the most natural thing in the world. Buck laying his head on John's shoulder when they danced, the perfect fit. The way his palm rested in the bend of the other's waist. Lips on his cheek, chaste and yet incendiary. Heat builds in his gut, coils tightly around his organs, rushes into his head and nestles behind his eyes. *What if, what if, what if.*

He jolts out of bed, shucking his shirt and undershirt, leaving him in only his slacks, a feeble attempt at cooling himself down. Determined now, he rushes across the room and for the door separating them, pulling it open with more bravery than he thinks he'd ever put into anything in his life. He pulls is with fervor only to be met with Gale's outstretched hand on the other side, wide eyes meeting his.

Breath stalling in his chest, he chokes out an unsure little *hi* that makes the other startle like he wasn't expecting it.

“Oh,” Buck breathes out, hand falling to his side. “John.”

“Forgot something, Gale?” The teasing tone comes easy after years of practice and even if he feels his own cheeks growing warm like he is, indeed, a schoolboy with a crush, he still manages to keep his tone even. Somewhere in the distance a raid siren sounds its call, warning of danger, but all Bucky can hear is the thrumming of his own pulse and the shuddering gasp leaving Buck’s mouth.

There’s a challenging spark there when Gale responds, body easing into something less frightened, something looser, more like the posture he has when on a horse.

“And what if I did?”

“I’d ask you what it was, probably help you look for it, too.” He leans against the doorjamb, biting back a smile and crossing his arms over his chest. This feel like a game. It feels like they’ve stepped onto a chessboard, just the two kings in a stalemate, neither of them willing to tip over and forfeit.

“Yeah? Think you can find it for me, do you?” That tone rumbles down John’s spine, makes him shiver, sweat, makes his knees weak.

“Oh, for you, Buck, *anything*.” He tips the king over and crumples like a sheet in the wind, lets go of the tight grasp he’s had on his self-control and surges forward.

Buck meets him halfway, practically jumping into his arms as John picks him up, hands under strong thighs, pressing him against the wall next to the open door. The kiss is messy, uncoordinated and laced with such sweet poison that he thinks he’s dying. This is all he’s wanted from the moment he laid his eyes on Gale, shining like a movie star in the Texas sun. He shoves past the other’s lips and teeth inelegantly, desperate to taste, to know every crevice.

A groan makes it out of one of them and he can’t tell who it belongs to. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters other than the crushing of their bodies against that damn wall, the warmth of Gale’s hands scrabbling along his bare shoulders, along his jaw and up into his hair, fisting curls tightly and bringing his head back.

He stares at the ceiling, nearly identical to the one in his own but feeling like he’s someplace entirely different. Because this room has Gale and Gale’s in his arms, thighs clenching around his hips as John holds him and lets him do what he wants. Buck kisses down from his

mouth, from his jaw, down the length of his neck. Teeth push against his jugular, the threat of a bite very real. In every possible iteration that he'd imagined this, never once was Buck this *demanding*, this *unrestrained* in his impulses and touches.

"Jesus, Buck!" He yelps as the other's teeth clamp down, enough to sting, making his dick jump in answer. He moans at the tongue laving across the spot, Gale pausing briefly to breathe before continuing to worry at the spot, making sure to leave a nice red mark.

"Fuck, *fuck."* He uses every ounce of his strength to pull them away from the wall. He walks them over to the rumpled bed, kissing the other briefly before depositing him onto the mattress. He follows him shortly after, crawling over Buck, settling between the other's spread thighs like he belongs there. If this is a dream, he doesn't want to wake up. And *God,* Buck is turning out to be frighteningly good at guessing all of John's weak spots. A well-placed hand at his nape and another one hooking fingers into his mouth have his eyes rolling into the back of his head, a violent shiver wreaking havoc in his body. What the fuck, *what the fuck?*

"That dirty mouth of yours, John." Buck hisses, holding him in place as square digits push his tongue down. "Wide and pretty, innocent-looking but deadly like a Venus flytrap. One wrong move and it'll snatch you right up."

He doesn't know how to feel about the comparison, isn't even sure what Buck's referencing but he gets the gist of it, can feel it in the vindictive way that the other's ravaging his mouth. He moans, sucking, trying to stop the saliva from escaping but it's inevitable and he's making a mess of the both of them. He's drooling onto Buck's shirt, onto hallowed ground, a dog at an altar. Never in his life had he felt this out of control, this pathetic for it. It makes sense that it would be Buck bringing it out of him.

"Always sitting there, grinning, flirtin', making me think you're joking because you flirt with everyone, all the time." Gale sneers, eyes flashing in the orange glow from the lamps next to the bed. "Lo and behold: John Egan, at my beck and call."

He tugs his mouth away, slides the other's finger out and drops his forehead against Buck's, a little harder than he meant to, enough to wince at.

"Stupid, *stupid."* He pants, tucking his thighs under Buck's, grinding

against him in a desperate motion that has the other stifling a moan. “Was always at your feet, was always there for you to take. I meant it, anything for you, Buck.”

Gale's eyelids flutter shut as he nudges their noses together. “Sorry it took me this long to notice, darlin’.”

“’S alright, doll. You weren’t meant to.” His mouth tugs up in one of those wide grins that Gale had condemned earlier, making the man mirror him as if it’s an instinct.

“Drive me crazy, John.” Buck kisses him before nudging him down. “Drive me fuckin’ mad sometimes, always touching.”

“Sorry,” He mumbles, fumbling with the other’s belt buckle as Gale shimmies out of his button-up and undershirt. “Sorry, can’t keep my hands off of you. Always wanna feel you up.”

It’s this sleazy phrasing that has Gale’s cheeks flaming red, bottom lip caught between straight teeth and John files this information as useful, deciding to test it. He undoes the belt and pauses, hand hovering over the other’s hardness, only two thin layers separating him from an action he’d tried to valiantly not think about.

“Wanna put my mouth on you, doll.” He groans, lowering his head down until he’s mouthing at the other’s rough slacks, sucking a wet spot into the fabric. “Want to have you all the time. Take you out dancin’ like we did today, then take you home and show you a good time. Thought about it so many times. Thought about you when I was with some of the girls – if she was blonde enough, had the right shade of blue in her eyes.”

“*John,”* Gale moans fully now, head thrown back and hands buried in John’s curls. “John, you bastard.”

An unruly grin overtakes his expression, incredibly pleased with himself at getting this reaction out of the other. At breaking Gale’s composure. He pulls the other’s slacks down and they shuffle around until the other’s fully naked under him, a blinding few moments of heat that are lost on him due to the fact that Gale’s *fully naked under him* and all.

“Need you to tell me if we’re doing a home run or not before I start anything.” He asks, thinking rationally for the first time since this began, now that the heat of the other’s skin isn’t clouding his judgment.

“A baseball metaphor right now, really?” Gale rolls his eyes, batting John’s hands away from his own belt and undoes it for him.

“I can make it sound worse, if you want.” He grins as the other glares at him.

“Get your cock out, John.” Buck deadpans and for a moment they’re both still.

“Yeah, alright.” He nods frantically, shucking his pants and kicking off his shoes and socks. And then they’re both naked.

He’s stunned by it, by this development, and the fact that these two days away from the reality of war was all they needed to get to this moment. That all they needed was some peace and quiet, an encouraging host and a couple of horses. If he’d known, he would have tried this sooner.

Gale takes his hand and spits into it, letting the drool run onto his palm and John’s so hard he could bend steel.

“How far?” He asks again, inches away from the other’s twitching hardness, curved slightly to the left, leaking at the tip into the divot of his hip.

“No home run, not tonight.” Gale looks away, the flush spreading down to his heaving chest.

“Anything you want, Buck.” He reassures him, happy to just be able to do this much, to be able to wrap his hand around the other’s cock and feel how he fits into his hold. Gale’s hips arch up into him, fingers gripping the pillow under his head for dear life.

He goes through with his original plan and lowers himself until the other’s thighs are around his head. His tongue darts out, wedged between his own fingers, languid movements until he replaces his hand with his mouth. He takes the other in, hollows his cheeks and Buck *shouts*. He can imagine it’s been entirely too long for the other and – *fuck*. For a moment, that thought makes him freeze up, guilt trying to claw its way through the haze of lust. But Gale’s legs twitch, sending him further up into his throat and John forgets about anything that’s not Buck.

“Bucky,” Gale honest-to-God *whines*. It’s as high pitched as he’s able to go – which isn’t that high, but to John it’s still a bird’s song. He redoubles his efforts, runs his tongue against the underside, pushing

until his nose is pressed against the other's skin, tears leaking down his face and drool escaping his mouth. There's satisfaction to be found in the way Gale's eyes go wide at the sight of him, at how reverently he runs his hand through John's hair.

"*Pretty boy*," The other breathes, those words that have been plaguing John's imagination finally being realized, brought to life. "Finally found a way to shut you up. All I had ta' do was get you on your knees."

It's his turn to moan around the other's length, the words washing over him, stoking a fire in him – furthering his fantasies. He'd never let himself get this detailed with them, always felt a little dirty. He'd get as far as kissing Buck in his mind, grabbing him roughly, before shying away from going further – too raw, an exposed nerve he never wanted to prod at. And so saying that this isn't what he expected Buck to be like isn't necessarily accurate. But it's a surprise nevertheless (even though maybe it shouldn't be). After all, commanding unruly men comes almost naturally to one Major Buck Cleven. Still waters and all that.

Gale tugs him off his cock, the grip on his hair firm, making John's scalp sting in the best possible way. He's throbbing against the beds sheet under them, wet at the tip and neglected, all his focus on Buck instead.

"Gonna come," The other warns. The hand in his hair is relentless but his other comes down to fit around his length, fisting it frantically. John opens his mouth, lets his tongue hang out obediently.

"Good, *good."* Buck groans long and drawn out like it pains him. "So good for me, Bucky."

"Gonna come on me, *Gale*? Gonna come on my face?" He goads, voice shot to hell from the rough treatment and the other's eyes dart down to his mouth, meet his gaze rapidly, before rolling back as his hand stills. He spends across John's nose and cheek, painting his face like he's his Mona Lisa. He groans right along with the other, desperate to taste but he knows there's other uses for it.

Buck's always been smaller than him, slimmer, almost delicate-looking when he's not in his uniform and big jacket. He's always been more wiry and lean and Bucky's watched his body contort in various ways through their years in basic, in pilot training, in the showers. But he's never gotten to look like this, to admire up close.

He runs his hands from the other's ankles up to his thighs, squeezing the muscle and loving the way they flex under his touch.

"Made a mess, Gale." He grins and the other looks embarrassed for a few seconds before he scowls.

"Not one word, Egan." Buck warns, a finger reaching for his face to, he assumes, try and clean him up but he swats him away.

He gets on his knees and slips the other's legs from his shoulders. Buck watches him with a suspicious look and John blindly swipes the come off his face and then spits into his palm.

"You're gonna love this," John snorts, thinking briefly about how clean Gale likes to keep himself. There'll be time for a bath later.

He slathers the insides of the other's thighs with the mess, making Buck yelp in protest.

"What the fuck?" Gale tries to squirm away but John smacks him on the ass lightly, enjoying the bounce as he settles down.

"You trust me, right?" It's a low blow, asking that when it's so obviously and unquestionably so. But he needs the confirmation, needs to know Gale will comply. The other nods and he pushes his legs together, has them crossing at the ankles and on his left shoulder as he pushes his cock between the other's thighs.

"Oh." Buck sucks in a sharp breath that has John grinning like a loon. The other tightens his legs and the grin drops right off his face. He mouths at side of Buck's knee, the pale hair soft against his face. He bares his teeth and hisses. He wants to say a thousand things, describe the feeling in a million ways but it all falls to the wayside when Buck tentatively reaches down and thumbs at the head of his dick.

His hips stutter, a muffled curse bursting out of him without permission. "Buck, *Buck.*"

"This is – fuck. Why's this hot, John? Why is it-" The other's flustered state is obvious again – in the way that his eyes keep dancing around their pose, John's face, the reappearing hardness between his strong thighs, he can't settle on a single thing and John's right there with him.

And he knew, logically, that Gale was new to this. Knew that he's the only guy to ever lay a hand on Gale in this way, but the wide-eyed

wonder on the other's face still blindsides him. Another mighty clench from Buck, the thumb against his slit and a moan accompanying his own is enough to send him over the edge, hips pistonning and then stilling as he spills across the other's stomach and into the divots between his muscles.

He slumps back, the fight leaving him in a rush as he lets the other's legs drop onto the bed. Buck's staring up at him as if shocked and John can imagine how disheveled he looks, how rumpled and out of breath. He feels like he was run over but in the best way possible, loose-limbed with a jelly core.

"That was," Gale starts but stops himself, opting to instead pull John down to lie next to him.

"Mm," He hums in agreement to whatever the other was going to say, too tired to think about anything other than the scent of musk and sex around them, the aftershave that Buck prefers. He rolls to the side and fits himself into the other's hold, makes himself smaller so that he can bury his nose against Gale's throat.

"A right kitten, you are." Buck teases, running his hand through tangled curls, setting them right the best that he can.

He mimics a purr and it makes Gale laugh which means it's worth the embarrassment of croaking in the middle of it.

"We need to clean up." The other tries but the words aren't reaching John as he luxuriates in the feeling of skin on skin even if Gale's still sticky in places.

"Later," He whines, nipping at the other's neck.

"Don't tell me you're gonna fall asleep?" A finger prods at his ribs, making him grumble. "What kind of gentleman are you? Passing out after coming like you're fifty years old."

"*Buck,*" He groans, long and loud, not understanding how the other still has enough energy left to be speaking in full sentences after the day they've just had. But, he supposes that Buck's always burned slow. Unlike John who exhausts himself in quick bursts of activity and energy and bounces back just a fast, Gale has stamina for days. His well deep and vast and it only drains after endless weeks of flying missions at which point he takes a day to sit somewhere quiet and read a book or two. He shouldn't be surprised it translates to this, too.

“Tsk,” The other tutts but settles down. “Have it your way.”

“Thanks, darlin’.” He places a kiss at the hinge of his jaw and lets himself drift off, sending a quiet prayer up into the heavens that this is not a dream or a hallucination.

Joan takes one look at them the next morning at breakfast and just *knows.* The smile that splits her face could illuminate the whole of London for a solid month with how bright it is.

He’d woken up tangled together with Buck in a messy bed, groggy and a little sore but feeling well-rested like he hasn’t in a while. He’d taken one look at the head of blonde hair under his nose and promptly thanked God that it hadn’t been a dream or a hallucination.

Not being much of a morning type, Buck had just patted him on the cheek lovingly and gotten a robe from a closet so that he can shuffle over to the bathroom safely. He’d watched him go, feeling incredibly lucky even though he knew she had nothing to do with it. And when they’d both freshened up and John’s mouth didn’t taste like he was dying, he’d pulled Gale into a sweet kiss and the other had reciprocated readily. No words needed to be exchanged in that moment, just the quiet reassurance of a hand slipped into his as they ambled down the stairs.

“How did you sleep, boys?” She can’t contain the giddy little bounce of her leg against the ground and John rolls his eyes fondly.

“Like the dead,” He shoots back, winking at Buck who’s in the process of trying to make himself invisible just by sitting still enough.

“Good, that’s good.” She settles back, patting Buck’s hand. “I’m glad.”

The rest of breakfast is passed by Joan and Bucky chatting quietly about her moving to America for the time being. John keeps the conversation going but he’s still keenly aware of how thoughtful Buck looks, keeping quiet for the most part.

It’s a quiet day. Joan leaves them to keep each other company as she entertains the men from the military, bargaining for preservation of some of her possessions, negotiating keeping valuables safe.

They sit in the library together, Buck reading a book and John with his head in the other’s lap. Every so often, Buck drops his hand down to run through his hair and John dozes with the gentle motions.

There's so much they need to talk about still. There's so many things left unsaid because they'd just jumped into it last night, unable to keep their hands off each other any longer. And he wants to open his mouth and speak but the thought of breaking the calm makes him shiver with fear. What if Buck doesn't want to talk about it? What if this, whatever it is, ends with their time at the manor? He doesn't think he can go back to the way they were, at least not in private, and that seems like something worth mentioning before they're set to return to Thorpe Abbotts in a few hours.

"When you asked me to London with you, before you agreed to come here with me, I thought *no, I can't.*" Buck starts gently, trailing fingers down the side of his face and over his cheekbones. He shuffles until he's on his back so that he can look up at the other.

"Thought: no, I don't want to. Because I didn't want to go and sit there and watch you twirl girls around, watch you drink yourself stupid, watch you take someone back to your room. Thought I'd have to fight you to leave me alone." Gale admits and John feels a pang of guilt at that. He – he had no idea. Obviously, he knew that Buck wasn't much for partying, but he didn't know about *this*. Didn't dare hope for it.

"I didn't know." He whispers.

"Shh," Gale presses a quick kiss to his forehead before continuing. "Pissed me right off with your comments, too. But when you agreed to come here with me, it felt *good* having you in my corner again."

He wants to protest that he's *always* in the other's corner, but Buck covers his mouth with his palm.

"And it was selfish, askin' you to change your plans like that, but I wanted – I still wanted to spend time with you. Just didn't want to do it out there, with the others." Gale's cheeks are red, they're so endearingly red that John has to bring his palm up and cup one of them lovingly. Sometimes, he forgets that Buck's younger than him. Not by a lot, but enough that he's still shy on occasion, that he's still bashful about voicing what he wants.

There is, however, the elephant in the room that they still haven't addressed.

He pulls the other's hand away and holds it between his own, rubbing gently at the knuckles.

“What about Marge, Buck? I don’t – even with how I feel about you, I won’t do that to her. Feels shitty having even done this much, war or not.” He looks away, the tension slowly seeping back into his frame as reality sets in.

Gale sighs, finally putting his book down. “After Regensburg, after we lost Curt, I sent her a letter. Told her not to wait for me. It rankled me, shook me to my fuckin’ core, Bucky. And you – you were a mess and I – I knew if you went down that I’d go down with you – voluntary or not. And that’s not – I couldn’t do that to her.”

He’s – he’s stunned speechless. The implication of the other’s words, the heavy weight of them, it all pushes into his lungs, leaving him breathless. He knew Buck was fiercely loyal, knew that he’d die fighting for his friends but to think of him jumping ship just to follow Bucky into and uncertain future, well.

“I love you,” He breathes out and then promptly clamps his jaw shut, teeth clinking together as Gale’s eyebrows climb into his hairline.

“Oh,” Buck’s thighs clench under his head and he winces. He wants to scramble away, make a joke out of it, but his body’s failing him and he can’t move. So he just stays there, avoiding the other’s piercing gaze like he’s being paid to.

“I don’t – I’m not expecting you to say it back, or anything, I just – I just wanted you to know that I’d do the same. That I’d follow you anywhere.” It’s a paltry appendix to his previous statement at best, but he had to say *something.*

“I suppose thinking about throwing yourself in front of enemy fire to save your fellow soldier isn’t exactly platonic behavior.” Gale bends down until they’re sharing the same air. “Love you, too, John. Even if you’re the stone in my shoe.”

“Never getting rid of me, Buck.” He grins, elated at the other’s admission.

“Not like I’d want to,” Gale hums. “Part of the uniform now, part of me.”

Being so wholly consumed by the feeling of someone else’s love for you is not something he could have even wished for in his wildest dreams. But here Buck is, vowing to follow John into enemy fire, to keep him by his side, to hold him through the worst of it. A bond forged in war, nigh unbreakable and he wouldn’t have it any other

way.

Joan sees them to the front door, a somewhat longing look on her face as they wait for the driver to bring the car around.

“Shocking as this may seem, I’m going to miss you two.” She squeezes John’s wrist and presses her cheek against Buck’s.

“Thank you for havin’ us in the first place.” Gale nods, still looking shy at her leer. “It’s been – well, it’s been like stepping into a different world. And we’ll miss you and the manor in turn.”

“You’re so sweet,” Joan sighs, her eyes shining suspiciously. “There’s nothing else to do but win this war so that we can all return here after, yes?”

“Course,” He nods firmly, adding Joan and her home to the list of things he’s fighting for, to the list of reasons he has to keep going for. “We’ll see you again when all of this is over. Pilot’s honor.”

The car pulls up on the gravel and Buck gives her a hug before taking their bags down with him.

“I’m proud of you, John,” She says, a little quieter, for his ears only. “I’m proud you chose to be happy. Even if for today, for tomorrow, a week, a month. Or forever.”

“You and I would’ve made the world stop spinnin’, in another universe.” He winks at her and she guffaws, cheeks a little red and the shining of her eyes undoubtedly tears.

“Well, in that case, I hope that universe’s you chose happiness, too.” She hugs him, her frame smaller than Buck’s but just as warm.

“Thank you for everything,” A brief kiss to the top of her head and he extracts himself from her hold lest he start crying.

She waves after them until they can no longer see her from inside the car. He leans into the seat and presses his knee against Buck’s.

“Onto new victories?” He asks, a little sardonically, mostly just to have the other look at him again.

“Together,” Buck affirms and John closes his eyes.

Joan was right about choosing to be happy, about allowing the

chance. Even if it'll be all the more painful when it's taken away from him, in that moment, being happy is worth it. It's worth his weight in gold, it's worth every good thing he's ever done, it's worth *everything* to him. Having Buck by his side and knowing that they're in this together, finally a united on all fronts, is all he could never have hoped for. And if they were to die tomorrow, he'll at least die knowing the answers to all of his *what ifs*.

End Notes

takes you by the face callum turner, am i right? good, glad we're in agreement.
Anyway. I'd like to apologize for two things: 1) my lovely little OC Joan who ended up having a much bigger role in this than i thought she would once i started writing. She sort of took over for Curt once he was out of the story and i just - i honestly think John never would have gotten his head out of his ass if there were no outer influences pushing him along.
2) the tonal shift we get midway through this. I wanted to have it being like the flak house without everyone else around and i wanted to make the manor a place of optimism, showing the boys what life could be like, helping them along some.
Also?? Accidentally made buck a horsegirl. or is he an equestrian? Te line is fine and thin.

Thank you for reading and sticking with the story! Leave a comment and check out my other stuff, maybe? xoxo
Twt and tumblr @marionettefthjm and the title is from primadona girl btw ._.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!